

Archive news report for the website of a private arts club

ADDENDUM TO THE CLIFF DWELLERS HISTORY

It's typical for the Cliff Dwellers clubhouse to be occupied by a member-sponsored private party on a Saturday evening, especially during the bleak Winter months. And so it was on January 28, 2001. What made this one special was not the event itself, but the aftermath. Following the usual clean-up procedures when the party ended, table cloths were removed and the worn wood tops were wiped with cleaning rags. Whether too many of the used cloths wound up in the same refuse container, or whether some other combustible agent got accidentally mixed with them, or yet another circumstance—what is known is that the kitchen was where the fire started during the early morning hours on Sunday, the 29th, when no one was present.

Any fire in a high-rise office building in downtown Chicago gets immediate and extraordinary response. The fire department units called to the scene had no trouble getting to the origin, even though it was at the top floor, twenty-two stories above street level. In spite of intense heat (some utensils at the immediate source were melted), the flames were extinguished fairly quickly. As part of the standard procedure, areas immediately adjacent were washed down by high-pressure hoses and windows were broken open to expedite the exit of smoke.

Technically, the fire itself was limited to the kitchen and connecting walls. Equipment either was rendered useless or was in a state requiring cleaning or repair. Unfortunately for the club, though, the greater disaster existed in areas beyond the kitchen. Smoke creates soot and on walls, the ceilings, and furnishings there was evidence of a fire by both a blackish film and a smoky odor. Drywall was ruined, along with the teak parquet flooring that buckled from the onslaught of water. Electrical circuits were shorted out and ducts above the false ceilings were contaminated. There was no question but that all of the clubhouse was unusable at that point, but no one could have known then how long it would take before the Cliff Dwellers would be able to return home.

What followed throughout the Winter and Spring months might well have been scripted from a Dickens novel or a dark comedy. Three insurance groups became involved in negotiating the cost of restoration and loss of business, and the consequent assignment of expenses—one representing the club, another for the building owner, and a third acting in behalf of the management company. Decision making came very slowly and, customarily, only after much prodding by an ad hoc legal committee created by the club. In the end, it came down to the threat of a law suit even though the Directors realized such an action could further prolong the timetable for reconstruction. But, such action proved to be unnecessary. All parties agreed to resolve any impasse and late in June the contracts were initiated for the many phases of the restoration project.

Throughout the Summer and early Fall, work went remarkably smoothly and adhered closely to a firm schedule. It was possible to include some modifications that enhanced club operations and appearance—such as creating a more convenient entrance to the supply room adjacent to the kitchen, improving air flow through new ductwork, making changes in the color scheme, and replacing or re-arranging placement of kitchen components.

A gala re-opening party took place on Friday, November 2nd. And, so, the Cliff Dwellers are back in their home, a clubhouse not bigger, but definitely better, than ever.