

## RESIDENTS STUNNED BY COCOANUT GROVE FIRE

### Local woman helped rescue victims

By Ellen Knight<sup>1</sup>

During the 1940s, New Englanders were watching the skies and preparing for attacks from the air—which never happened. Nevertheless, the training supplied by the local Civilian Defense and Red Cross agencies was not for naught. There were other trials and disasters, including one famously devastating event in 1942 for which one young Winchester woman's training had prepared her to help.

On the night of November 28, 1942, the Coconut Grove in Boston became the scene of the deadliest nightclub fire in history. An estimated 1,000 people were in the nightclub, about twice its authorized capacity. A popular site, it was later shown to be a firetrap.

When fire broke out, most avenues of escape were blocked, either bolted or jammed by patrons attempting to flee through poorly designed exits. Many who escaped or were extricated by firefighters were seriously injured. For about an hour and a half after the fire began, the dead, dying, and injured were arriving at Boston City Hospital at a rate of one every 11 seconds. The fire killed 492 people.

Some people in the area were too stunned to help. Others rushed forward. As reported in *The Winchester Star*, a former resident and her husband, Elsie and Charles Kaeselau, whose apartment backed on the nightclub, heard screaming and left their dinner party. Among the first at the scene, Kaeselau and a guest helped break open a back door and pull people from inside. Elsie Kaeselau also helped by holding a huge torch the firemen put in her hands and at one time playing a hose over her husband and friend during their rescue work.<sup>2</sup>

### RED CROSS TRAINING IN ACTION



*Underwood in high school*

Also in the vicinity was an Oxford Street resident who stepped forward to help. Trained by the local Red Cross chapter, she plunged capably into the dangerous and desperate situation in a manner which earned her accolades from the Boston newspapers.

A graduate of Winchester High School, Class of 1941, Nina Underwood was the daughter of George B. Underwood, a former sports editor of the *Boston Globe* (and a 1904 Summer Olympics medalist) who was then working for the War Production Board. For 18 months after graduation, while employed at a jewelry store in Boston, Underwood took courses with the Winchester chapter of the Red Cross, becoming a nurses' aide. She worked on the ambulance in Winchester every Sunday.

On Nov. 28, she was in Boston to have dinner and attend the theater with a friend. She just happened to be near the Grove shortly after the fire started (about 10:15 p.m.) and wanted to help. "My Red Cross arm band and official cards enabled me to get through the lines, and when I asked a doctor if I could help, he told me act as a nurse on the ambulances which were taking the injured and the dying from the entrance of the Melody Lounge," the *Globe* reported.<sup>3</sup>

"Within an hour, she saw scores of dying and dead, gave emergency treatment to many in improvised ambulances, led a stretcher party of soldiers into the wrecked building and helped bear bodies on stretchers herself," the *Boston Herald* reported.<sup>4</sup>

"During the night I was on the ambulances continually," she told the *Globe*. "I made the trip to City Hospital at least 15 times, and I don't know how many to other hospitals." She said she did not want to describe the horrible sights and agonies of the victims, "but I think the practical disaster work we have done was excellent preparation for an actual disaster."

She said she was surprised she stood up as well as she did. "Witnesses said she remained cool and capable throughout the most terrible experience of her life," the *Herald* wrote.

"The first trip I made to the City Hospital was in a taxi cab. The cab drivers were wonderful all night. We had no stretchers, and I had to improvise them out of coats. Four of the drivers lined up with their coats and followed my instructions in making the stretcher. I don't know whether they ever got them back."

She used her own coat to cover some of the patients. "Unless the burned people were covered up when they got into the air, their skin fell off," she said. "I felt pretty cold without the coat, and we were constantly drenched going inside the entrance to take out the bodies.... I lost my coat three times during the night and somehow miraculously got it back."

Many servicemen were in and outside the club. "The first time I went inside the club building it was all smoke, and I could see bodies on the floor. The second time, because I knew the way, I led a group of soldier stretcher bearers inside." She went back inside over and over.

She praised the servicemen, saying "nobody can say too much about the wonderful work they did. Not one of them gave way to his feelings, and their officers organized the work very efficiently. One sailor was in the club when the fire started and threw his coat over a woman whose dress was afire. His uniform was burned off, but he borrowed some clothes somewhere and insisted on going on with the rescue work."

"Three hours after the fire started a sailor lying on the floor suddenly rose and walked out unaided. A Navy officer was brought out on a stretcher, but he jumped off and said, 'If you think I'm badly off, you ought to see some of the others in there. Go back after them.'"

## USED JIU JITSU

Both Underwood and Kaeslau commented on people wandering about the street hysterical or dazed. "Hysteria really gave all the rescue workers most of their trouble," Underwood said. "I had to knock out a man and a girl with jiu jitsu because they were impossible to control. The service men constantly had to forcibly restrain people from plunging back into the building." (In fact, one resident's sister, a cashier, died because she went back into the building for a large sum of money.)

Helping often meant ignoring danger. "Whenever I went inside the building, the police warned me that the roof might cave in. We were too busy to care about that. And if we stopped to sympathize with victims instead of giving them first aid, we wouldn't have gotten anything done."

Underwood also gave credit to Civilian Defense workers who were directing traffic and doing other work. "Their worst trouble was in keeping away curious onlookers who couldn't stand the shock of what they saw and hampered the workers."



*Underwood as  
photographed by the Globe*

On her last nine trips to City Hospital, all the victims they carried were dead. During her last hour at the City Hospital, "I went round with a flashlight helping to open eyes to see if life remained and then, in most cases, closing them again."

At about 2 in the morning, a couple of policemen drove her home. "When I got there, I suddenly realized I hadn't called my parents. They were worried, but mother was calm about it. I was an awful-looking sight, too, with my clothes smudged and bloodied."

The *Boston Globe*, *American*, and *Herald*, which all reported her story, called her a heroine. The *Boston Traveler* honored her on its WEEI radio program where she related some of her experiences at the fire.

## LOSSES AND ESCAPES

The horrors of that night hit home in many greater Boston communities. Among the 492 killed, nine were from Winchester, three others were former residents, and at least two locals were seriously injured. Those killed included two local teachers, a widely known athlete about to enter the Army, the parents of a six-month old child, a second couple newly moved to town, an officer in the Army Ordnance Corps, and a young woman who worked in the Navy Recruiting Station.<sup>5</sup>

Underwood said it would have been too terrible to think of people she knew being in the club while she was engaged in rescue work. Later she realized she did, in fact, know one of those who

died (the assistant band leader, an Everett resident). She missed seeing another Winchester resident, Douglas Graham, since he was taken to the hospital in a private car. Luckily he survived to tell the story of his escape.

Graham (WHS Class of 1939) had been at the club with his fiancée who danced at the club. He was waiting for her at a table near the stairs that led to the dressing rooms when the fire broke into the floor of the club. He attempted to get to her assistance but was overcome by the heavy smoke. Revived by fresh air entering through an opening forced by firemen, he managed to drag himself through the opening into the street before collapsing again.

Meanwhile his fiancée escaped by jumping from her dressing room window into the arms of a group of sailors below. When Graham's whereabouts were learned, the couple had a reunion at the City Hospital to which Underwood had been going back and forth for hours. They were married the next May.

Also among the injured was Jeannette Mullin, a resident of Stevens Street and a kindergarten teacher at the Washington School. As well as being hurt, she contracted pneumonia and spent six months recuperating. About a year after the fire, she enlisted in the WAVES to replace her fiancé, an army officer who perished that night.

About six months later, Underwood, whose four brothers were in the services, enlisted in the WAVES. She was sent to the Advanced Hospital Training Technician's School in San Diego. While stationed in San Francisco as a corpsman/nurse, she married Frank P. Young Jr., a decorated Marine. Not only the mother of seven children, after the war she went on to be an executive secretary to a Navy admiral.



*Underwood in her WAVES uniform*

Although many sad stories would be printed in *The Winchester Star* during the war years, the issue covering the Cocoanut Grove fire was unique, with 12 obituaries, two rescue stories, and two survival stories spread over its pages.

"All Winchester was shocked as news of the tragic fire at the Cocoanut Grove revealed the fact that nine residents of this town, including several widely known and universally popular young people, perished in the blaze that wrought such terrible destruction at this Boston night club last Saturday evening. Besides those dead several from Winchester were among the injured, and most citizens spent much of Sunday at the radio listening for news of acquaintances and friends," the *Star* reported.

"Long-time residents of Winchester can remember nothing associated with the town that has had such tragic consequences."

,

---

<sup>1</sup> This article © 2023 by the author Ellen Knight is a revision of an earlier article by the author published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Nov 17, 2017. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

<sup>2</sup> The Boston Globe, Nov 30, 1942.

<sup>3</sup> The Boston Globe, Nov. 30, 1942

<sup>4</sup> Undated clipping supplied by relatives of the heroine.

<sup>5</sup> Those Winchester residents killed included Marion Ambrose, Mr. & Mrs. Robert B Charles, Joseph Dineen, Wilbur Meserve, Mr. & Mrs. Lee McIntosh Saunders, Helen Welch, and Katherine Woods. *The Winchester Star* Dec. 4, 1942 carried a story about the victims.