The World War II years were difficult for Salt Lake City Fire Department. Truck parts, tires and gasoline were in short supply and rationed. Many members left to serve in the military and the pool to hire replacements shrank. Turnover was high as young men came and went. Adequate training and experience were in short supply. The two platoon system with 24 hrs on-duty and 24 hrs. off-duty schedule resulted in an 84 hr workweek with pay that was considerably less than any of the war-related industries were generally paying. 1942 had seen the highest dollar fire loss in city history with $828,026.73 in losses. While 1943 losses dropped to a mere $355,984, the human cost was much higher. Four firemen were killed in two downtown incidents. The Annual report of the City simply states, “The Fire Department lost four efficient members.” The Fire Department yearbook said, “To the memory of their efficiency, courage and comradeship, we pay humble respect.”

Morale on the fire department had been declining for some time. The city’s civil service commission was considered hostile to the fire and police departments and often seemed to delay hiring or promotion of public safety personnel. The mayor and fire chief complained that the commission hurt emergency services and forced the fire department to operate short handed by delaying or ignoring their requests. Firefighters grumbled about favoritism among their officers. When Harry Christensen, Melvin Hatch and
Theron Johnson died at the Victory Theatre on May 19th discontent on the department boiled over. Within days the City Commission requested investigations into the Victory fire and the workings of the department.

No other incident in the history of the Salt Lake City Fire Department caused as much upheaval and discontent as the Victory Theatre Fire. No other structural fire incident in Utah caused more firefighter deaths. No other firefighter fatality incident received more public attention.

Less than a month later, fireman Paul Hamilton died after the department’s pride and joy, the 100 ft American LaFrance ladder truck affectionately known as “Big Dan” collapsed at a fire on the 7th floor of the “fireproof” Hotel Newhouse on Salt Lake’s Main Street.

The theatre located at 48 E 300 So. was originally called the Colonial Theatre then the Pantages, then the Casino then Loew’s State before being finally renamed the Victory in 1924. It was built in 1908 at a time when there were really no effective building or safety codes in effect in Salt Lake City. The famed theatre was the stage for stage shows and plays for several years before the equipment was installed to also show films. Twenty five years to the day before Fireman Harry Christenson was laid to rest after dying there, the theatre showed the first “talking picture show” in Utah. Al Jolson starred in “The Singing Fool.” This event was touted all through the intermountain west although the “talkies” were thought of as a fad that would not last.
The Victory was a typical theatre of its time, ordinary construction, a main auditorium floor laid directly on the ground, an upper and lower balcony, a stage with a brick proscenium and a small basement below the stage. A projection booth had been added to the lower balcony with a concrete floor. A great deal of heavy projection and related sound equipment had been installed in it. The Theatre was 130 by 80 feet wide. The main entrance was through a large two-story lobby on the north that opened onto 300 South. The auditorium itself was behind other occupancies that also directly fronted 300 South. These included storefront businesses and the St George Hotel. At the north end of the auditorium the 30 ft. lower balcony extended over the ground level seating area. The front of the balcony was well supported by a steel I-beam and steel posts. The rear of the balcony and projection room was supported by wooden joists set into pockets in the brick north wall that separated the theatre from the other occupancies. There was a second balcony above the lower one. The main seating was on a wooden floor structure resting directly on the ground. There was a narrow alley on the east side between the theatre and the St George Hotel and on the west, the theatre abutted the Paris Millinery Company and a short alley from the rear onto which fire exits, with metal stairs, descended.

At the time of the fire, the theatre had been closed for about two weeks while remodeling work was taking place. On the morning of May 19, 1943 the first workman, Bert Berch, showed up just before 8:00, unlocked the front doors and made his way through the darkened theatre to the stage where he unlocked the stage exits so that the rest of the crew could come in. He climbed up to the fly loft (the high area the curtain and stage backgrounds were hoisted into) and began his work. Other workers came in and were constructing scaffolding they needed for the stage remodel. He had been up there for about 15 minutes when he first noticed the smell of burning rubber. He did not see any smoke or fire in the cockloft or anywhere till he made his way down and saw some seats in the auditorium in flames about 16 rows from the front. He then pulled the alarm box near the stage and grabbed a hose line from one of the wet standpipes and began to try to extinguish the seats. Headquarters station received the alarm at 8:24 and when the first companies arrived, (Engine 1, Ladder 1(known as Big Dan) Engine 2 and a rescue car), acting Battalion Chief Don White observed the flames in the seating area and directed workmen to play a stream from a second standpipe line onto the area. The first-in crew of Engine 1, under the supervision of Lt. Melvon Hatch laid fire hose and air lines to supply the breathing air masks into the structure and knocked down the fire in the seating area. Breathing apparatus of that period consisted of a hand operated air pump with long hoses attached to facemasks. There never seemed to be enough of these apparatus to equip all crews and since they were tethered by the hose they were really only usable by crews staying in one place. Ed Phillips and Theron Johnson used the masks as they played a hose stream onto the seating area with Lt. Hatch.

Lt. Limb and the Ladder 1 crew were sent to the St. George Hotel that fronted the theater on 300 South to check for fire extension and life safety. There was no problem there so they went to the roof of the theatre in an unsuccessful attempt to manually open
the ventilators but they were nailed shut. Limb ordered a hose line and forcible entry of the vents but nobody carried out this order.

Engine 2 took the hydrant west of the theatre and then ran hoses down the alley towards the exit on the southeast corner. Lt. Abelhausen from Engine 2 had his crew relieve, the maintenance man, Berch’s crew who were still using their small standpipe hose. While the engine 2 crew cooled the seating area with their hose Abelhausen went with Berch to the basement to try to access the area under the auditorium floor. From an opening in the air conditioning duct they could see fire but by the time they got a hose line down, conditions in the basement had deteriorated to the point that they could not make an attack. Abelhausen’s plan B was to cut a hole in the auditorium floor and insert a cellar nozzle. His crew never accomplished that objective because of deteriorating conditions overhead. Abelhausen saw a dense layer of smoke mushrooming down from the balcony and could hear fire roaring but could see no flames. He directed hose streams up towards the ceiling areas and balcony.
Below: Foyer of Victory theatre where crews staged to enter auditorium on left. (Used by permission, Utah State Historical Society, all rights reserved)
View from the stage looking north. Projection booth is located at top of lower balcony. Columns along back wall allowed fire travel up into balcony structure from beneath auditorium floor. (Used by permission, Utah State Historical Society, all rights reserved)

It soon became clear to Chief White that there was fire beneath the auditorium floor and a great deal of smoke had developed in the balcony area and this was rapidly mushrooming across the ceiling some 70 feet above the auditorium floor. At 8:35 he called for a general alarm.

Assistant Chief Lloyd Egan got the call on the radio in his car and quickly responded. Egan arrived within a few minutes, did a quick size-up, assumed command and ordered ventilation by opening doors and windows. Water supplies and more hose lines were also deployed. Egan’s efforts were hampered by the fact that several of the arriving companies were undermanned, had no officer in charge or the officers were directly engaged in firefighting operations. No one on the scene could see that fire had spread upwards beneath the seating area towards the foyer and then had traveled through hollow decorative columns built around 8X8 posts into the floor of the balcony. No crews went to the balconies. Lt. Hatch’s crew continued to fight the fire that continued to spread through the seating area and was joined by later arriving crews some of whom advanced farther into the building. Ed Phillips was taking a beating on the nozzle and asked to be relieved. He gave his mask to Harry Christenson and went outside to help on the pumps.
Engine 4 laid lines from the rear to the northwest exit but stayed in the doorway while applying a stream inside.

Other crews were sent up into the neighboring buildings where they were the first to observe fire and smoke issuing from roof and the nailed-shut ventilator openings on the theatre. Obviously by this time fire had spread into the cockloft constructed of heavy timbers. Egan ordered crews to force open the ventilators and the upper exit doors on the fire escapes to allow the escape of heat and gasses.

Fire crews from the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad, led by chief mechanic “Big Dan” Cunningham and from the Utah Ordnance Plant, led by former Salt Lake City Fire Chief Walter Knight, helped at the scene and two crews from Salt Lake County, commanded by Chief John (Jack) Clay, arrived to cover the rest of the City. 12 years later, in 1955, Clay would be killed by a fire in Murray, at the Soter Furniture Company.

Radiant heat ignited the edge of the roof on the Paris building and crews quickly attacked the extension. These crews, from their high vantage points observed the worsening conditions of the theatre but could do nothing from their positions but protect the exposures.

When Chief LaVere Hanson arrived at 8:50 he went to the lobby and then walked quickly around the entire structure, a journey of 1,100 feet to see what was being done and to do a complete size-up of conditions. He arrived back at the lobby at 8:58 just as the rear of the balcony collapsed onto the crews working under the balcony near the edge of the foyer.

Hatch, Christenson and Johnson were pinned under the rubble and died of burns, crush injuries and smoke inhalation. Lt. William Limb seriously injured his back when he fell from a ladder. Capt. A.R Ward fought his way as far as he could out of the collapsed area through ten feet of burning timbers, suffering burns and smoke inhalation in the process. Chief Egan desperately pulled Ward from the building and then both were taken to the Emergency Hospital with smoke inhalation. Fireman Luther Stroud was struck by a falling pipe as he attempted to reach his trapped comrades. Lt, Evan Hansen, firemen George Kilpatrick, F.E. McKinnon, Glen Crowther and Elmer Hansen also sustained various non-life threatening injuries.

In the aftermath, even as funerals were being arranged, someone claiming to represent the Firemen’s Relief Association began collecting money, supposedly for the fallen men’s families. Police searched in vain for the perpetrator of the fraud.

Chief Hanson formed an investigation committee to find the cause of the fire and what caused the collapse. This committee consisted of a police detective, an investigator from the National Board of Fire Underwriters and a Salt Lake City fire investigator. Despite their efforts and those of the Fire Prevention Bureau, no definitive cause of the fire was found. Rumors swirled concerning possible arson or sabotage but nothing evolved from these speculations. Circumstantial evidence points at an accidental under-floor electrical origin. On the other hand, reasons for the collapse became clear rather quickly. The balcony was never designed to hold the weight of the projection room and its equipment. The hollow columns provided a perfect pathway for fire spread from under the auditorium floor up into the floor of the balcony. The fire burned there undetected in the concealed space while the attack crews concentrated on the lower fire and the fire showing above the balcony. The wooden floor joists quickly burned through allowing the collapse. Without a complete understanding of the unique construction features,
firefighters and officers had no good way of knowing the extreme hazard they were in. If the Prevention Bureau knew of the problems, there is no record of that information being relayed to the combat personnel. Nor was there provision in city codes to force upgrades that would have increased the safety of the actual balcony structure or to require retrofit of fire sprinklers.

The tragedy of this fire and a series of other events gathered energy into a perfect storm that broke against the beleaguered leadership of the department. The father-in-law of Theron Johnson, a print shop owner named James Giles, decided to launch his own inquiry. He talked to some of the firefighters who were at the scene and then filed a complaint alleging that Ed Phillips, a sixteen-year veteran of the department, had warned Lt. Hatch that the balcony was in danger of collapsing but that he was ignored and sent outside to help on the pumps. He further charged that the fire department had known for years that the building was defective and presented unusual dangers in the event of a fire. He went on to allege that the department was run by a clique of hard-drinking officers who were not responsive to other members of the department. He stated that another person came forward to tell him that a Battalion Chief’s car was frequently parked at a nearby bar. The allegations included provocative wording such as incompetence and recklessness in regards to command at the fire. These charges prompted the City Commission to launch an inquest while Mayor Ab Jenkins was absent. The Mayor, whose responsibilities included oversight of the public safety departments, strongly objected to this process and offered his own plan, which was rejected. Nonetheless, the Commission appointed some prominent citizens to a committee to conduct the probe. None of those appointed had any fire expertise. The committee changed membership as the probe progressed.

In response, the Chief and the Mayor requested that Jay Stevens, a widely respected authority on the fire service from the National Board of Fire Underwriters, conduct an independent investigation into the fire and the response of the department. Stevens came from the west coast several times to conduct 85 interviews, examine the fire scene and to review procedures. He went so far as to set a bonfire in the ruins of the theatre and pull the box alarm. This false alarm was said by Stevens to be a common procedure to determine response time and was necessary in this case to determine actual department response since the details of the original response were in dispute and had not been recorded. The exercise resulted in an Assistant Chief arriving in two minutes with a ladder company a few seconds later. This test of the system was disconcerting for arriving crews who had also been on the response to the real fire.

The parallel investigations continued throughout July and into August until final reports came to very different conclusions. The Commission’s investigation lambasted the Chief on numerous fronts while the Stevens report exonerated him.

In the mean time, Chief LaVere Hanson pleaded with the City Commission to hire more firemen and two more battalion chiefs to supplement the two existing positions in order to provide better command and control at big fires. The Commission responded by appointing three new battalion chiefs. The Chief did not fare so well. Following the investigation by the citizen panel and a closed door report to the Commission, Hanson was demoted on August 12th despite his passionate plea and refutation of charges against him and one of his Assistant Chiefs, Lloyd Egan.
The committee report drew heavily on what it saw as digressions from Standard Operating Procedures in the department drill manual based on its interviews of various witnesses. Most of the testimony to the committee was information volunteered behind closed doors by various department members. There were no transcripts made of the committee’s proceedings so there is no record of the questions asked or the context or details of the responses. We do know that strategy and tactics were criticized as well as lack of leadership. One specific criticism was that hose streams were not applied into the opening when the roof burned through, a tactic once common that has been thoroughly discredited due to the danger it presents to anyone in the building as the stream pushes massive amounts of smoke and fire back towards entrances or other openings. The committee report stated that the loss of life was “due to negligence of superior officers in active charge of combating the fire.”

Mayor Ab Jenkins was quoted in the minutes of the Commission the day of the demotion, “I have heard of individuals being railroaded and today I saw it.”

The conclusions of the investigation committee were also strongly disputed by Jay Stevens, who concluded, following a parallel investigation, that the tragic fire was indeed handled properly by the officers who could not have known of the collapse potential. He went on to refute a number of the other charges against Hanson and Egan and accused the Commission of a “cowardly action,” by not allowing the chiefs to defend themselves. Stevens concluded that “niether the fire department as a whole, nor any of it’s officers in particular are entitled to special criticism for the handling of the fire.” Nevertheless, the decision of the Commission stood.

Hanson was personally devastated by the blame placed on him and what he felt was an unfair process, driven by politics. Indeed there was politics involved, after all it was an election year. Mayor Jenkins, Hanson’s supervisor, was strong willed and often clashed with his colleagues on the Commission. The complainant, Mr. Giles, had been the campaign manager for Commissioner Matheson. Giles insistence that Hanson be punished undoubtedly influenced events. Internal Fire Department strife, even before the fire, contributed to the outcome also. An addendum to the citizen’s committee report expressed concern about a “clique of officers” who drank excessively and would not consider input of those outside of the clique.

Mayor Jenkins felt that the Chief had been wronged and attempted to promote him to Chief of the Prevention and Arson divisions. Hanson, in turn told reporters that he “Feared for the Mayor”. Hanson believed that his ouster was a political blow by the Commission against the Mayor. Hanson returned to duty as a Captain but within months went on medical leave for a heart condition and then took a medical retirement.

The turmoil seemed to overshadow the sadness and grief felt by the families and colleagues of the dead. In August the Commission authorized a total of $16,269.71 and burial expenses be paid to the families of Johnson, Hatch and Christensen. A firefighter’s life in 1943 was thus worth just a bit over $5,000.

26 year-old Theron Johnson had been with the department less than a year. He was previously a baker, born and raised in Huntington. He joined the Department at the same time as his brother-in-law Grant Walker. Walker was on the Victory Theatre fire and undoubtedly was deeply affected by the loss. Walker became Chief of the department in the 1960’s and after retiring took the job of State Fire Marshal in the 1970’s. Johnson’s
father also died at age 26 while working for the State Road Commission. Theron left a widow one daughter, a brother, sister and his mother.

   Harry Christenson was a seasoned veteran with 19 years of fire experience. He was born in South Dakota January 24, 1893 into a large family with two brothers and five sisters. He left two sons, a daughter and his widow Zoa.

   Born in Payson January 29, 1903, Lieutenant Mel Hatch was 17 yr. veteran firefighter who had enthusiastically taken on the responsibility for all civilian and fire department rescue squads in Salt Lake City. His death left a daughter, son and widow to mourn along with his parents and three brothers.

   Hatch’s widow, Maud, strongly disputed the Citizens report conclusions. She told Commissioners in a letter, ”Through constant effort and diligent application of his experience, he won promotion to lieutenant and had been qualified as a captain and would have been made such had his life not been taken by the fire. He did not get his promotion through a clique. This is not only untrue but it is extremely unfair. These men work and study for advancement. I know, for it was my job to know as the wife of a fireman who lived his job. The stigma of ‘negligence’ is equally unfair, for it infers that my husband was also negligent. Had there been any physical indications of the collapse I know he would have seen them.”

   She went on to pass on her husbands praise of Egan as his role model and Hanson as “the most naturally inclined fireman ever affiliated by the Salt Lake Department”.

   There was a lot to be learned from this fire and the ensuing proceedings and these lessons are not just those concerning the conduct of the firefighting operations. Certainly operations would be handled differently today. Incident Command and accountability systems, portable radios, SCBA, ventilation techniques, thermal imaging, building and fire codes, GIS information systems are all modern developments that could have made a difference on this fire. Yet some things don’t seem to change. Fire service culture and attitudes don’t change just because technology does. Firefighters and their officers still get tunnel vision, still miss important details, still let macho attitudes overrule reason, still stress suppression over prevention and they still die in fires. Hopefully we’re getting better and will learn from the sacrifices of those that came before.
Demolition photo. View from exterior southwest corner near stage exit, looking northeast. Horizontal beam over truck supported front edge of lower balcony. (Used by permission, Utah State Historical Society, all rights reserved)
St. George Hotel building and former entrance to Victory theatre, January 2007. Building vacant except Southam Gallery, 50 E Broadway. Photo by Steve Lutz
Chief LaVere Hanson. (Used by permission, Utah State Historical Society, all rights reserved)

Sources: Salt Lake Tribune; Deseret News; Minutes of Salt Lake City Commission; Salt Lake City Municipal Record; Fire Engineering Magazine Vol.96 No.10; Retired Chief Jim Berry; Salt Lake City FD
Case study questions:
What processes are in place in your jurisdiction to communicate hazards found during inspections or law enforcement activities, to responding fire companies, police and EMS?

How could they be improved?

What would have happened if hose streams would have been applied into the roof opening when the fire self-ventilated?

What current Fire/ Building Code provisions, if applied to this building, could have prevented this tragedy?

What SOPs are in place in your jurisdiction for emergency response to large assembly occupancies?

How could they be improved?

You are the city administrator responsible for public safety when a tragedy like this happens. What steps and processes will you take to investigate the incident?

Allegations unrelated to the specific fire come up during your inquiry. How would you handle them?

Earlier Photos of theatre can be found at:
http://content.lib.utah.edu/u/?/USHS_Shipler,8437
http://content.lib.utah.edu/u/?/USHS_Shipler,8349
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