

THE ENTERTAINMENT WORLD

BY E.C.

The Dromcollogher Cinema Fire Disaster



● I have been a regular visitor to Dromcollogher since the late 1940s, when I prepared Ireland's first-ever post-war advertising feature to spotlight carnival dancing. My friends there are many and I am often asked to retell the details about the disastrous cinema fire of Sunday, September 5, 1926, when 48 lives were lost.

● From information gathered down through the years, it appears that the cinema was a makeshift affair and that the audience on that fateful night totalled almost 200 local people, and a few from the adjacent townlands.

● The film was "The Ten Commandments", the classic starring Richard Dix, Edythe Chapman and Rod La Rocque, made by Cecil B. De Mille three years earlier.

● In the '20s, highly inflammable nitrate film was used and, apparently, when the film had been running for about fifteen minutes, a cigarette end came into contact with a reel of film that had been lying unprotected on a table beside the projector.

● The film ignited instantly, but, according to witnesses, the operator had almost succeeded in extinguishing the blaze when somebody struck it

with a cap, thus showering sparks over other reels.

● In minutes, the entire makeshift building was ablaze.

● The building was mainly a wooden structure with only one door, which was situated close to the table carrying the projector and the spot where the fire started. The few windows at the other end of the building were barred.

● The tragedy drew international sympathy. The victims were buried in a mass grave in the local churchyard. One family lost six members.

● Offers of financial help poured in from all parts of the country and, indeed, from abroad. From Hollywood came a leading star of the time, Will Rogers, to take part in a concert in aid of the relatives of the victims. This concert was in the Capitol Cinema, Dublin, which today is British Home Stores.

● Surprisingly, it was not until the 1940s that non-inflammable film came into use.

● Probably the most beautiful theatre ever built in Ireland was to be destroyed just a year after it had opened its doors. This was the 3,000 seater Coliseum in Henry Street, Dublin, which was

gutted in 1916.

● The best remembered, and still talked about, Dublin theatre fire, must be of course that which gutted the Abbey in 1951. This necessitated the tenancy of the Abbey Players in the Rupert Guinness Hall, and later the Queen's Theatre.

● I witnessed this fire which reduced a fine theatre to ashes. Dubliners cried as the flames roared through the building.

● Cinema disasters around the world continue, the latest being in Turin, Italy, with a loss of almost seventy lives.

● A theatre in Chicago burned in 1903 with a loss of 802 lives. Many were trampled to death in the frenzied rush for the exits.

● Today, Dromcollogher continues in its own quite and unassuming way to be one of the leading business communities in County Limerick. Situated as it is on the borders of Limerick and Cork, it is a busy crossroads of commerce and enterprise. But even today, fifty-seven years after the disaster, the old folks still talk about the night of the fire that will never be forgotten.

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