Our Century 1908

By Fred McGonagle

Pitcairn, frightened into the burning bell where the children were.

"He caught his girl's hand while she kept her eyes on his face. Then the flames caught her. Her hair became a torch. She gave a last un- owned shriek, then the father fell back blinded and beaten.

The Plain Dealer told many stories.

Florence, fount of terror, threw a ladder up to a window of the burning school. Some picked her up and swept into the struggling mass and pushed out the sides. But last Mrs. Florence sprung saw of him."

James Turner, 14, was out at the last when he realized his younger brothers were still inside. "The fire dashed back into the building, despite the efforts of the rescuers to keep him back. All three children died."

William Schaeffer "caught a glimpse of his 7-year-old son Frank in the burning wedge of humanity. Reaching in, he managed to grasp one of the boy's arms and pull it out. The boy's hair and the arm came off at the shoulders. The child was searched for the others.

The Cleveland school fire of March 4, 1908 — affectionately known as the worst disaster in Cleveland history — was the one in which two teachers escaped the 129 killed in the East Ohio Gas Co. explosion and the 148 who died in the Cleveland-Cincinnati fire of 1929.

But the Cleveland mothers were more the ears of the parents who ran to the burning building and heard their screams and only watch.

Lakeview Elementary School, on Collinwood Ave. in the village of Collinwood, had 396 pupils in 1896. Two years later, Collinwood would be part of Cleveland and the street would be named E. 105th St. The three-story building had a brick exterior, but the interior was all wood.

The fire apparently was caused by an overheated steam pipe upon the joists under the front stairs. It was discovered as a child who had gone down to the gym bathroom in the basement awoke and told Horler, the janitor. He quickly ran to open the front door and rear door. In previous fire drills, the school had been emptied in 90 seconds. But the classes marching toward the doors found fire and smoke coming up the stairs. They panicked and ran to the back entrance, where others were trying to crowd through the narrow vestibule doors.

Several fell and others tried to force their way through. One of the boys had blown out the fire extinguisher. The boys were on the narrow space. Teacher Grace Folke and her second graders were trapped between them and the panicky students who continued to stair down the stairs. Soon, the floor gave way and they all plunged into the burning basement.

Classes on upper floors fled using the fire escape. Others jumped out of windows into the arms of neighbors.

Katharine Collier got most of her third-grade class out safely, but turned back to try to save other chil- dren. Her body was found with theirs.

The bodies were taken to a make shift morgue at the Collinwood Yards.

"The ambulances galloped back and forth with howls of sirens and white with labels. "The Plain Dealer reporter "The bodies were laid in rows on the ground floor, between the floorboards and beams, and covered with blankets."

Children everywhere were safer because of the terrible fire that hap- pened in Cleveland 90 years ago.

McGonagle is a lance writer.

The names of the 172 students and the two teachers are displayed on a memorial in the New City School for those who died March 4, 1908.