As winter 1966 settles over Longmeadow, Massachusetts, the house at 184 Primrose Drive is shrouded in ominous quiet. The grass around the modern, upper-middle-class home has grown tall, and the property shows signs of neglect. The casual passer-by may not notice the blackened windows, although perhaps he will wonder why plywood has been nailed over one downstairs window.

No one has been in the house for many months. The man and woman who own the dwelling will not even drive down this street. On the rare occasions when they visit friends on Primrose Drive, they park on another street and make arrangements to cross someone’s back lawn to get to their friends’ home. Why? On March 1, shortly after midnight, while the couple were away, their three children and one of the two women who were caring for the children died in a fire in that house.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the cooperation of Chief James O’Brien, Longmeadow, Massachusetts, Fire Department, in obtaining the information and the photographs upon which this report is based.
The two-story-and-basement wood-frame dwelling (see drawing) sat in an area of well-maintained homes in Longmeadow, a suburb of Springfield. The front of the first story was brick veneer. The attached two-car garage had a single electrically operated overhead door. A door on the side of the garage led into the utility room of the house.

The interior finish of the house was plaster on rock lath, except in the den, which was finished with plywood paneling. An open stairway led from the front entrance hallway to the upstairs bedrooms. The first-story rear porch that had been enclosed for use as a bedroom had windows about five feet above the floor. The second-story windows on the same side of the house as the garage were of the same type. All the other windows in the house, except the large bay window at the front of the living room and the picture window at the back of the living room, were ordinary double-hung wood sash with a pinched-type lock on each side of the lower sash. The storm windows outside these double-hung sash windows had a pull pin on each side that released the bottom section for raising and lowering. All the windows in the house operated easily.

The interior doors were hollow wooden flush doors, except the double doors to the first-story bedroom (which, as was noted above, had formerly been a porch). These doors were of the heavy outside type, with small panes of translucent glass near the top. The rear door leading from the utility room to the outside was secured from inside with four locks, because the land behind this house and nearby homes was wooded, and cases of breaking and entering were not uncommon in the neighborhood. The four locks consisted of bolts at the top and bottom, a safety chain, and the regular mortise lock.
downstairs, entered the downstairs bathroom, and closed the door. It is possible that she discovered the fire in its incipiency, fled into the bathroom, and "froze," making no sound for some time, and too late beginning to scream. Her body was found in the bathroom. The upper 60 per cent of the hollow-core bathroom door had burned off. A small mechanical or windup clock in Lori’s bedroom stopped at 12:12 am.

Way and lunged at the door to Jamie Dee’s room, tearing the hook eye from the door as she fell into the room, where her body was found beside the bed. The open door also spelled the end for Jamie Dee as smoke and heat poured into the room.

Andrea Sue apparently heard the commotion, got out of bed, and put on her robe. She opened the door but did not go out into the hallway. Her body was found beside the bed. The door to the room was slightly ajar. Had she been drilled in an escape plan, she could easily have escaped through a bedroom window to the roof of the downstairs bedroom. A mechanical clock in her room stopped at 12:25.

Angela Palmer—the sole survivor—awoke at Lori’s screams. She got up, put on her bedroom slippers, and opened her bedroom door. The pressure from the fire knocked her backward to the floor. She scrambled back to the door and pushed it shut. Realizing that she could not escape through the high windows in the room, she put her winter coat over her head and ran out of her room and into the adjoining kitchen. She saw flames at the ceiling coming from the hall doorway on the opposite side of the kitchen, and realized that she could not reach the front door. The thought of operating the four locks on the outside back door caused her to run to the garage.

When she entered the garage from the utility room, she found that the electrical controls to the overhead door would not operate. Strangely, that circuit was the first circuit in the house to be knocked out by the fire. Miss Palmer was then seized by panic for the first time. She quickly regained her senses, however, and ran back into the utility room and to the outside back door. She remembers unlocking three of the locks, but

Mrs. Hunt awoke and got out of bed. She apparently realized there was a fire and very methodically put on her robe, picked up her glasses, prescriptions, and checkbook from the bed table, and started to leave the bedroom. When she opened the bedroom door she was met by intense heat and smoke. She ran down the hall.

This was Andrea Sue’s room. The window overlooks the roof of the downstairs bedroom, which had formerly been a porch. The child’s body was found beside the dresser in the background. The clock in this room stopped at 12:25 am.

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she cannot remember the fourth. She did get the door open, with only seconds to spare, and ran outside, dropping her coat as she went. The neighbors next door were watching television when she ran up to their house and started hammering on the door. When she told them of the fire they immediately telephoned the police department. Miss Palmer was later treated for minor burns, smoke inhalation and shock. She has since returned to England.

**ALARM OF FIRE**

The phone call from the neighbor was logged at 12:25 am, the exact time that the clock stopped in Andrea Sue's room. Heat had stopped the clock in Jamie Dee's room 15 minutes earlier. By the time the two men on duty at the fire station gave the radio tone alert to off-duty men and volunteers and rolled out of the station with an engine and a ladder truck, it probably was too late to help anyone in the house. The running time to the fire was less than two minutes. When the firemen arrived, simultaneously with policemen, fire was bursting out the window of the den and flames were boiling up over the front-roof overhang above the window. Even the firemen almost lost their professional composure as neighbors shouted at them to “do something” and pointed to the windows of the rooms that were thought to be occupied.

The firemen raised a ladder to the front window above the living room, expecting to gain entrance to the master bedroom, but when one fireman entered through the window, he found himself inside a clothes closet (No. 5 in the drawing) and could not find the door to the bedroom. Smoke and heat quickly drove him back outside.

Meanwhile, other firemen arrived and stretched a hose line. They knocked down the fire in about ten minutes. The captain and the chief went up a ladder to the front window of Jamie Dee's room (No. 1 in the drawing). The captain entered under protection of a fog pattern, picked up the child, and passed her through the window to the chief. From the appearance of the child it was obvious to the chief that there was no hope for anyone left inside the house. The actual fire damage had been confined mostly to the den, which was gutted. The intense heat and the smoke had ruined the finish and the furnishings in the remainder of the house.
Top: The corner of the den in which the fire is thought to have started. The remains of the couch are shown beneath the charred frame of the window that faced the front of the dwelling. The damaged piece of furniture at left is a table. The springs shown in the lower left corner are all that remains of a chair.

Center: Evidence of the intense heat and smoke can be seen in this picture of a portion of the living room. The stairway is at the far left. The window at right is at the back of the house. The damage to the living room (on the opposite side of the house from the den, where the fire started) was relatively light—mainly smoke damage, as the blackened walls indicate. The stairway is at the far left; the window at right is at the back of the house.

Bottom: This view from the living room shows the entrance hallway, with the front entrance at left and the stairway at right. At the end of the hallway in the background is the entrance to the den. The downstairs bathroom opening on the hallway is immediately behind the coat closet shown here.

Top: Longmeadow, Mass., Fire Department
Center and Bottom: Steve Lemanis

The bodies were removed and the fire department and the state fire marshal began their extensive investigation into the cause of the fire. The reports read "Probable cause was careless smoking." Firemen covered over the broken windows, and the house was locked.

A REMINDER

And so the house at 184 Primrose Drive stands as a silent sermon on the tragedy of the dwelling fire. The fire itself was ordinary, as dwelling fires go. Even the loss of four lives was not very unusual. Herein lies the lesson. More than half of those who die from fire each year perish in "ordinary" dwelling fires—those fires we generally hear least about. This "ordinary" dwelling fire serves as a stark reminder of the urgent need to increase public awareness of the hazards in the home and to set up and conduct regular home exit drills.

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