

## FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 76: 1914 (THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS)

By Richard Schulte

The eighteenth annual meeting of the National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) was held in Chicago in 1914. The following is the NFPA president's address at this meeting:

### **"PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.**

*Robert D. Kohn.*

*We are met here in Chicago this morning at the opening session of the Eighteenth Annual Convention of the National Fire Protection Association. Our least meeting, held in New York, was marked by every evidence of enthusiasm and I hope that this meeting in Chicago, the home of the Laboratories, will set a new record for forward-looking propaganda work in the great cause for which this Association was founded; **the preventive work of life and property protection against the fire danger.***

*At the close of the last Annual Meeting-when conducted to the presiding officers chair, I made an attempt to express to you my embarrassment at my elevation from the ranks of a simple private to the responsibilities of the presidency. It seemed to me that it was hardly proper that a person of so little experience as myself should assume an office of such importance—an office held in the past by men of expert knowledge and great distinction in the field of fire protection—an office indicating in a way the leadership over a group of men forming this Association, men who had for seventeen years worked in the most distinguished, enthusiastic spirit toward the development of standards of fire protection.*

*After a year's association with the details of this organization's work I am more than ever impressed with the importance of the work that has been accomplished, and convinced that my perfectly sincere disclaimer of last May was justified by the facts. My service to this organization can therefore, at best, be that of representing it in certain directions in a public capacity. I cannot report to you on the achievements of its committees along scientific lines. That you will get during later sessions of this Convention. I can, however, indicate from the point of view of one who stands somewhat outside the active detail work of the organization, some of its accomplishments during the past year in the way of the public expression of its ideals. You have in my opinion only now commenced to reap the harvest of many long and arduous years of work. It is safe to say that the public of this country is actually beginning to wake up to its responsibilities in this matter of fire prevention. Everywhere there are signs of improvement; much helpful legislation has been passed and a man who preaches the need for fire prevention is no longer suspected of ownership of insurance stock, or a secret interest in a patent fire extinguisher.*

*I would like to be able to claim that all the progress made in the last few years in the way of improving the conditions in our cities had been due to the work of this Association. **As an actual fact our cause has been furthered by great catastrophes. In my own state of New York a series of fires resulting in an enormous loss of life was the first shock that caused the awakening.** I doubt that even great loss of property could have accomplished this. It was the loss of life that stirred the people to the serious problem. It resulted in the appointment of special investigating commissions and the passage of drastic laws in a number of states looking toward the correction of the conditions that made the losses possible. It was in the preparation and support of these laws and ordinances, first forced upon the attention of our legislators by an aroused public opinion, that the members of our National Fire Protection Association have been of invaluable service during the past year. In Pennsylvania, in New York and in many other states this help was of the greatest value, for they had at their command standards long since framed by this Association and the experience gained in the preparation of those standards, so that they could speak as experts on topics unknown to the average legislator.*

*One of the interesting first steps in this direction was the visit of the entire Industrial Board of Labor Department of the state of New York to the Laboratories in January, a visit which resulted from an invitation issued by this Association. The members of the Industrial Board spent two days at the Laboratories, witnessed a series of exceedingly interesting tests and inspected the Laboratories from top to bottom. While none of the members of this Industrial Board is technically trained, they realized the scientific spirit in which the Laboratories' work is conducted and acknowledge they were immensely impressed with the technical principles on which the standards of this Association are based. The result of the trip was unquestionably valuable. It proved to at least one Government Commission that there is such a thing as expert knowledge on the subject of fire protection. If the visit did no more than this, it was worth the effort expended upon it by your officers.*

*In this matter of legislation and the assistance of legislators we are, of course, only in our infancy. We have only the very foundation of good laws in a few of the states and communities. It is, however, the first step that counts. By accomplishing a little in a few communities we ought to be able to wedge in similar or better legislation in other communities. It ought no longer to be a necessary precedent to good legislation in any city that there shall first be a loss of 150 lives by fire in that city. We have a great task ahead of us trying to impress this necessity throughout our country, and we must be prepared to steer the aroused public enthusiasm in the right direction. We must speak as experts and demand to be heard, for this organization represents the people who really know whereof they speak.*

*In directing public opinion we will be immensely helped by public meetings of the character of the Philadelphia Congress last November and by our district branches, the local Chapters of our National Association which have been formed during the past year. You will hear from others detailed reports as to the organization of those local Chapters. Successful starts have been made in four or five cities and enthusiasm has been shown in each of these cities for the work that may be done locally in the furtherance of our cause by organizations of our members in the different communities. The value of these local organizations will be evident as soon as they take the proper stand in this matter of city and state legislation. In the past there has been no recognized source of disinterested authoritative information on the subject of fire prevention in the different localities. Any person with a little or no knowledge who cared to call himself a fire prevention expert could and would break fourth into print with opinions on any and every topic under consideration. Our National Association officers and committees were frequently too far removed from the local interest to be of any assistance when a really critical situation arose. Wherever we have a local Chapter of this Association, a body of experts in other words, well organized and well managed and "on the job," we can be certain in the future that the public will listen to their views on questions of fire prevention and the local amateur will disappear, be suppressed or learn something about the subject.*

*Our members, the American Institute of Consulting Engineers, have taken an active part in our work this year, and the American Institute of Architects has shown its increased interest through the creation of a Standing Committee on Fire Prevention under the Chairmanship of an able and active member. We have made steady advances in our general membership during the year, as you will hear from the Secretary's report, not only in numbers but in the quality of our accessions. Our directly allied members and associates are after all our best missionaries. We must keep up the campaign for members. We must try to reach the people who build and those who pay for building construction—the builders, the architects and the investing public.*

*In conclusion, let me say that I do realize the importance of the technical work being so splendidly put at our service without cost by the members of our various Committees. I know of some of our Committees that have produced, during the year, documents that are going to be of the greatest possible value. I have chosen, however, in this address to dwell more specifically on the public aspects of our work. I feel that it is in this direction that we now have the right and the duty to push forward with ever-increasing insistence. We have the knowledge, we have the standards which are the results of years of work, we know that we know, now let us go out and make the world realize that we know, and that we are ready to tell what we know. If we do this we are going to reap, not individually, but for the whole people the benefits of our eighteen years of work, through the application, in legislation, of the standards that have so splendidly and disinterestedly been prepared for us. May the sessions of this Convention be fruitful in the production of plans of an active propaganda for the education of public opinion and toward the expression, in legislation, of the great life and property-saving methods for which this Association stands.*

*(Applause.)*

*The Vice President: Gentlemen, you have heard the address of the President. What is your pleasure?*

*Mr. Chase: The Executive Committee outlined a few years ago, a wider and broader program for the work of this Association. That was the first step. The second was the selection by the Association of a President to carry forward this bigger and broader program, and the Association's choice of Mr. Kohn was a most happy one. I move the acceptance and adoption of the President's report, coupled with the thanks of the Association for the exceptional service and the inspiration which he has given in his direction of the work of the Association.*

*The Vice President: Gentlemen, you have heard the motion, and we will hear what we know will be a unanimous expression of approval of it by the members. All those in favor will say aye. (The motion was carried.)*

The catastrophe that the NFPA President referred to in his address was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire which occurred in New York on March 25, 1911. The fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory caused 146 fatalities and 71 injuries.

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Richard C. Schulte