

## **FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 145: 1911 (THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS/WILLIAM H. MERRILL)**

By Richard Schulte

The fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory located in the Asch Building in New York City took place in the late afternoon of Saturday, March 25, 1911. The fire claimed the lives of 146 occupants of the building, many who leapt to their death. Less than two months later, the National Fire Protection Association held its Annual Meeting in New York. As was the custom, the president of the Association addressed the meeting. The following is the transcript of the President's Address at this meeting:

*"The fifteenth annual meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was convened at the appointed hour in the ballroom of the Hotel Waldorf-Astoria, New York, with the President, W. H. Merrill, in the chair .*

[TEXT OMITTED]

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

*Fifteen years is a brief space of time in the history of an organization; it is briefer in the history of a nation. **Yet for our country, this period includes the San Francisco, Baltimore, Chelsea and Bangor conflagrations, the Windsor, Iroquois, Collingswood, Boyertown, Slocum, Lenox, Cherry, Newark, Chicago Stock Yards and Asch disasters;** not a day without its long list of properties destroyed and not a month without record of the sacrifice of human life. It marks a burnt offering of more than two thousand million dollars worth of our created resources, and the lives of more than twenty thousand of our people.*

*Many times and in many places I have called attention to these facts, as have others of our members, and if people will listen, we must continue to speak of them; for, otherwise, the lessons which they teach will accomplish less for humanity. Had these twenty thousand persons been killed fighting for their country rather than simply for their lives, their fame would be everlasting. Had these two billions of property value been wiped out by the invasion of a foreign foe, the call for defense would meet with an universal response. But west of the Mississippi people are a bit hazy as to whether a thousand souls perished with the Steamer General Slocum from fire or shipwreck, and east thereof not altogether certain as to how or whether each one should play a soldier's part in combating this neighborly enemy,— FIRE.*

*If people will listen, we must continue to speak of these things, and we must continue to show them how through the various agencies of the National Fire Protection Association each one may do his part for the common good. And thanks to our activities, the people are listening in greater numbers each day, and it is therefore well that we have our record of fifteen years of earnest, constant, efficient work, that we may supply the ever increasing demand for solutions of the problems involved by this enormous and disproportionate waste,—this blight upon the fame and prosperity of America. It is well that during fifteen years we have proven in practice the soundness of our recommendations, for proven facts are demanded and being utilized today as never before.*

*Formulated largely by men whose daily avocation is the analysis of fire risks, having in consultation with them representatives of all the interests involved and furnished with data on details by thorough and competent laboratory experimentation, it was reasonable to suppose that our specifications would successfully meet the requirements of practice; but it is comfortable to feel that such is the case and that we are not theorizing in the recommendations we make for safeguarding the lives and property of our fellows.*

*We prescribe real buildings of fireproof construction, not shells with unprotected vertical and horizontal openings, and finished or equipped with combustibles; real fire windows, not merely things of glass and metal; real fire doors with fire (not ordinary) door hardware; real automatic sprinkler installations, not partial or ineffective equipments or perforated pipes; real fire hose, not the common shoddy substitute; real first aid appliances, not those which require fires educated to meet their limitations; real fire signaling systems; real structural methods and materials; real fire fighting apparatus; and so on through the whole field of fire protection.*

*In the field of fire prevention, this, our fifteenth year, marks the assimilation by us of the work of two National Institutions, which have been energetically and successfully engaged side by side with us throughout our existence. It is a matter of satisfaction to feel that all parties in interest have had that high degree of confidence in the National Fire Protection Association necessary to entrust to us the future of the National Electrical Code, a standard for safeguarding electrical work which is adopted as the law of more municipalities and the rule of a greater number of other organizations with authority than any other set of specifications in existence. Of equal importance is the fact that we are henceforth to carry forward the various National Standard specifications covering the hazards of explosives and combustibles, to keep them in step with progress in the several arts, and to compile new standards for new subjects when the need is apparent. The present state of perfection of many of these standards, particularly, those covering gases and oils, is the result of years of study and years of observance of their application in practice. We have assumed these responsibilities with a due sense of their importance and with a high appreciation of the wisdom and broad-mindedness of the officers and directors of our brother organizations, who throughout the negotiations have shown only an unselfish desire to secure those great benefits to property owners and the public which must come from the establishment and maintenance of uniformity in fire prevention engineering practices.*

*In the less involved subjects of the common causes of fires, we have furnished constant and repeated advices, covering principally the hazards of Christmas Decorations and Displays, the Sane Fourth of July, the Defective Flue, the Fire Hazard of Politics, the Fire Bug, Fire Danger and Children, the Cost of Carelessness, Fire Dangers from Stoves, and kindred topics.*

*Of special and miscellaneous subjects, our reports, pamphlets and papers cover thousands of items, information from which has been freely distributed wherever the need for it was apparent. We have added the spoken to the printed, the pictured and the written word, the activities of our representatives embracing an average of an address each week before organizations of business men and others in the principal cities of the country from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and from the Lakes to the Gulf. Certain of these efforts have been given wide publicity by the press, thus bringing the importance of our cause home to millions of readers. It is well that fire waste topics other than the latest fire horror of the day are beginning to have a news value which recompenses for the telegraphic toll; for the computations of our publicity bureau show that nothing is more far reaching in its effect than the dispatch which secures head lines on the first page of all the metropolitan dailies,—it percolates.*

*The admirable articles and editorials in our quarterly magazine are also widely quoted and copied, many of them attracting attention in one form or another during periods of a year or more after their publication by us. Specifications which we have prepared, adopted and recommended have run through many editions, hundreds of thousands of copies have been distributed, and their provisions are found embodied in many laws, rules and contracts relating to the various subjects which they specifically cover. **We have designed, advocated and caused to be installed in many cities and towns the National Standard uniform thread for hose couplings and hydrant fittings,** thus relieving in a greater measure each year the deplorable and unwise conditions which have prevented the fire apparatus of one town being of any considerable aid to its neighbor in case of emergency.*

*Our activities in all of these directions are recompensed by knowledge of a public duty well performed.*

*The organization which is successful in safeguarding lives and property against loss by fire is surely doing no small thing for humanity.*

*We have also our material rewards. The growing appreciation by the public of our work and our methods has brought a correspondingly large increase in our membership and in contributions to our cause. Our fifteenth year is made notable by the largest annual increase in membership and the largest gain in our financial resources recorded during any one year in the history of our organization. If our present broad policies in respect to the interests of our fellow citizens and our methods of dealing with them are continued, we may reasonably expect much greater acquisitions in the future.*

*The National Fire Protection Association extends its welcome to each passerby who may express an interest in fire protection or fire prevention. He may join the effort for the general good which has been crystalized, and is being carried forward through the constantly broadening influence and work of this Association. Each one may obtain for himself through this agency information and advice on matters of fire protection engineering from experts trained in this profession, and at the same time add his helping hand and the moral influence of his membership to the effort of the thousands of loyal soldiers already enlisted, and doing brave battle against the evil spirits of the flame.*

*Following each recurrent horror committed by this enemy of mankind, public officials point accusingly each to the other, organizations adopt resolutions, and indictments are made against individuals, departments and communities. **The Iroquois disaster furnished fire curtains for theatres and a memorial hospital in Chicago; the Asch Building horror will undoubtedly result in some things of benefit to the people of New York.** But consider the needless sacrifices for such comparatively small gains! And think of the benefits to be derived from concentrating all of the well-meaning efforts occasioned by such catastrophes into the working machinery of a common agency. Efficiency is a popular word to-day. **Efficiency in fire protection and prevention is defined by a joint national effort for the common good.** Ninety-two of the principal national Engineering Societies, national Manufacturers' and Merchants' Associations and Boards of Underwriters are united in the active membership of our organization for the sole purpose of economically and effectually producing results of practical benefit in safeguarding the lives and property of the American people against loss by fire; more than a thousand local Boards, Bureaus, Departments and individuals are included in our associate membership, because they recognize the power of collective action; upwards of seven hundred persons, firms and corporations are enrolled as subscribing members, both because of the benefits they derive and the benefit they give.*

*It is difficult to wage successful battle against an enemy always in ambush, who is constantly springing into action in a variety of manners and in many places. It is hard to arouse sustained interest in a proposition that does not admit of argument; it is not easy to create enthusiasm for the suppression of carelessness, when many of the persons addressed are guilty of this offense.*

*But surely an organization can do more than the individual, and an organization with equipment more than one without. The National Fire Protection Association has the equipment, the experience, the expert working committees, the record of a volume of work accomplished, the tools and facilities, the men and the methods for the alleviation of this national disease. The trouble cannot be entirely cured, because we cannot rebuild our cities, or immediately alter the characteristics of the American people. **We shall have other conflagrations and further fire horrors as penalties for the negligences of years.** The priceless papers and records of other states, like those of Missouri and New York, may serve the ignoble purpose of fuel for a wanton flame. People may be burned in dozen lots and be forgotten by many, as doubtless are those who perished in the lesser disasters at Yore's Opera House in Benton Harbor, Robinson's in Cincinnati, the Klondike at Milwaukee and the Lincoln and Fish fires at Chicago. It is wholly possible that persons in one of our great office buildings may yet come to the same fate as the crowded workers of the Triangle Waist Company.*

*But we can save the next generation from much of the shame attached to ours. We can eradicate severe conflagration conditions in many of the cities; we can safeguard premises where large numbers of people congregate; we can minimize hazards of all kinds; we can attack the common causes of fire in our own and in our neighbors' homes; we can specify effective extinguishing apparatus; we can promote fire inquests; we can supply material for popular education on the significance of the fire waste. In short, we can go about the business of fire defense. And the most effectual, uniform, certain and expeditious way to do this is to support to the fullest extent, and to utilize wherever practicable, the tried and proven methods and machinery of the National Fire Protection Association.*

*W. H. Merrill, President.*

*The Chair: Gentlemen, you have heard the President's address. What is your pleasure concerning it?*

*Mr. Goddard: I think we have listened to our President's words not only with great interest, but with considerable pleasure, and that pleasure is due, to a large extent, to the very efficient and concise manner in which he has brought before us not only the work for which this Association is organized, but the work which it has really done in the past fifteen years. It seems to me it would be not only of benefit to the public at large that this address should be circulated, but that it would be of great benefit to this Association that the work in which we are engaged should be placed before the public in that way, thus helping the Association to a better standing with the public and in that way perhaps as efficiently increasing the results of our work as in any way that could be adopted. I would move you that the address be accepted with the thanks of this Association, that it be printed as usual in the proceedings, and that the Executive Committee be authorized to circulate this address to parties who will not receive our proceedings or who will not read them if they do get them, so that the facts which our President has so very clearly brought out may be laid before the public generally.*

*The motion was adopted."*

Quite remarkably, a number of Mr. Merrill's predictions regarding the future of fire in America have come to fruition—conflagrations which destroyed large parts of our major cities were eliminated with a combination of improved building regulations and improved fire apparatus and fire department equipment. Today, the number of major life loss fires which occur in the United States has been dwindling, thanks again to improved building regulations and improvements in fire department equipment.

Along with the dwindling of the number of major life loss fires, the number of fire fatalities which occur in the United States has also been trending downward over the last 35 years. This reduction in life loss can be attributed to fewer fires, residential smoke detectors and sprinkler protection. Over the next few decades, it would appear that we can expect that both the number of fires and the number of fire fatalities which occur in the United States will continue to dwindle.

With a requirement that all new dwellings be protected by a residential sprinkler system, we can look forward to someday coming close to eliminating fire fatalities in United States. How long will it take? Your guess is as good as mine, but perhaps in next 40 years might be a reasonable estimate of the time frame.

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