

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 150: 1917 (THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS)

By Richard Schulte

The war which engulfed Europe in 1914 continued into 1917. On April 6, 1917, the United States entered the war on the side of Britain and France. A few short weeks later, the twenty-first Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association took place in Washington, D. C. As was the custom at these meetings, the President of the Association addressed the meeting. The following is the text of the President's Address:

"The Chair: Members, we have now the pleasure, of welcoming President Meek, who arrived from New York this morning. We shall now have the President's address, which we missed at the opening session. President Meek. (Applause.)"

President Meek: I feel that I owe the members an apology for not being present at the opening of the convention, but I am convinced, from my experience in the last two days, that all business engagements in this confused time should be made subject to delay. It has been very interesting to listen to the debate this morning. I think it very well reflects the high character of the Association. It is a splendid endorsement, the earnest attention that was given to this debate, which I understand was carried over from yesterday. I have prepared a few lines which, I suppose, may be called the President's address.

President's Address.

President Charles E. Meek, of New York.

In approaching the subject of fire waste, many speakers and writers emphasize the vast difference between the annual loss in this country and the loss experienced in other countries. These comparisons are always unfavorable to us, but, after all, are they not typical of the way we do things? Under ordinary conditions we spend more for our living, our clothing, our building enterprises, our public improvements, our governmental expenses. The average American spends a dollar quicker than a cent. We are taught to think in big amounts, and it has been truly said that amounts running into seven figures fail to impress us deeply. The question now is: Are we not approaching a time when it will be necessary, through force of circumstances, to look at things differently? If the situation the country is now in only results in teaching us the value of a dollar, the investment we are making will be a profitable one. The conservation of our natural resources and the prevention of unnecessary waste in our material production is more important today than ever before.

For the first time in our history we have attained the distinction of absolute supremacy over the entire world both in finance and trade. The question is: Can we maintain that position? The answer to that is, not if we continue our wasteful habits—of which our arch enemy, fire waste, is most pernicious. To quote from President Wilson's recent Address to his Fellow-Countrymen: "This is the time for America to correct her unpardonable fault of wastefulness and extravagance. Let every man and every woman assume the duty of careful, provident use and expenditure, as a public duty, as a dictate of patriotism which no one can now expect ever to be excused or forgiven for ignoring."

The cause which brings us here is a noble one, but, unfortunately, it has not in the past received the measure of support which it merits. We must drive into the heart of every business man a realization of its importance and of our sincerity of purpose.

The total fire loss in this country, for a period of forty years nearly equals the amount Congress has authorized the Secretary of the Treasury to borrow for war purposes, and the loss for the year 1916 was greater than the initial issue of \$200,000,000 of Certificates of Indebtedness. This should be sufficient to awaken all to a full realization of the burden of wastefulness we struggle under— all the more serious when we take into account the fact that a large proportion of the loss is due to carelessness and untidiness.

While there is nothing very cheerful in this, we have grounds to congratulate ourselves for this reason: the percentage of loss has decreased, or, in other words, we are not burning as much now in proportion to our total values as in former years. On the other hand, the seed we have scattered has taken root and is bearing fruit.

In a general way you are all familiar with the development of the crusade we are conducting, which renders it unnecessary for me to review in detail the results of the year's labor. Encouraging symptoms have developed in many directions. Our work has progressed and we have drawn closer to us organizations and individuals who appreciate more fully than ever the truth of our gospel. The various committees have continued their valuable work, which has been fully realized as the reports have been presented. The relation of the National Fire Protection Association to its committeemen is unique, for not only do the committeemen contribute their experience and time, but they also assume the payment of their personal expenses. This alone should be sufficient recommendation to attract a more general support, especially from business men.

The National Fire Protection Association has never yet been self-supporting. Each year it has received an appropriation from the National Board of Fire Underwriters, the motive, for which has simply been of a public-spirited nature. I am going to state frankly that I hope the time is not far off when the organization will be self-supporting, as it deserves to be.

The Secretary is the center around which the work of an organization revolves. Mr. Wentworth, who fills this office, is exceptionally well qualified, but the condition of the organization's treasury has limited the extent of his activities. The only solution of this situation is through an enlarged membership. Experience has proved that membership work requires systematic and persistent effort. It is as distinct a part of organization work as the sales department of a business. My recommendation is that the work undertaken by the Membership Committee, this last year be continued along more efficient lines and with the assistance of a competent person under the direction of the Secretary. In other words, let us have a real member-getting department. The thanks of the Association are due those members who undertook the initial performance of the Membership Committee, which resulted in a generous response.

As your President for the last two years, I have had ample opportunity to observe your work, and can unhesitatingly express my admiration of the high purpose of those who contribute so unselfishly to such a good cause. Your co-operation with the officials is keenly appreciated, and, in closing, permit me to express my confidence in the organization's future.

Passing, as it were, into the retired squad, I assure you of my willingness to respond whenever my services can in any way be helpful. (Applause.)

The Chair: You have heard the President's thoughtful and eloquent address. What is your pleasure?

Mr. Stewart: I move that the President's address be accepted and the recommendations contained therein referred to the incoming Executive Committee.

The motion was adopted.

Mr. Stewart: I would like at this point to ask the privilege of the floor for a moment for Mr. Powell Evans.

The Chair: We are always glad to hear from Mr. Evans.

Mr. Evans: The record of the Association in recent years has shown a continuing growth in its standards. The only standard it has not appreciably improved has been the standard of its presidents, and the only reason that standard has not been improved is because it cannot be improved I would like to say a word, however, to emphasize the value of our outgoing president's work. He has proven the exception to the rule that you cannot serve God and Mammon. He has not failed in-making good in two jobs instead of one. Indeed, he has succeeded in three jobs,— he was a credit to the Credit Men (none better ever lived in their ranks); he has brought credit to this Association, and his record now in banking is equally creditable. If he will now introduce us to that banker who is needed to bring us the financial strength to which he refers in his annual report, we will consider him not only one of the best Presidents we ever had, but the super-President. (Laughter.) We nevertheless claim him as our own, and on behalf of the Association I now desire to hand him a little sticker to adorn the exquisite neckties which he affects, and we trust it will often be in evidence at our future meetings.

(Mr. Evans presented Mr. Meek with a diamond scarf-pin, and the members arose from their seats and warmly applauded.)

President Meek: Gentlemen, I appreciate this testimonial of good will. I also appreciate the words of Mr. Evans, but so far as Mr. Evans is concerned, he needs no introduction to the gentleman he referred to,— the financial man. Mr. Evans happens to have an exceptionally fine record at the institution with which I am connected, and now that he has been so kind to me, I feel sure that he need never fear coming to see us at any time, because I shall be there to back him up. (Laughter.) I am wearing in my necktie a little sticker given me by the Credit Men's Association. I have always considered it a star; I shall now have two stars by adding to it the one which you have presented to me today. I do not know which I shall value the most; I think I shall value them equally. My part in this Association's work has been very small, very limited, but I feel that any contribution a man can make, no matter how small it is, to a cause so worthy as this is well worth his while. I only hope that more of our friends, especially friends with business connections similar to my own, may see the light and come forward and give you the assistance and support that you deserve. I thank you most heartily for this little tribute, which I feel is undeserved. (Applause.)

Chairman Wentworth: I now have the honor, Mr. President, to turn over to you the gavel of the meeting.

Once again, President Meek delivered both a brief and eloquent address to the membership in 1917. Of note was the reference to the relationship between the NFPA and the National Board of Fire Underwriters (NBFU).

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