

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 174: 1922 (THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS)

By Richard Schulte

The twenty-sixth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was held in Atlantic City, New Jersey in early May, 1922. As was custom, the President of the Association addressed the meeting. The following is the transcript of the President's address:

“President's Address.

WILBUR E. MALLALIEU, President.

In contemplating the fire waste of the past two years, I have been reminded of an incident said to have occurred in an eastern hospital. The patient of a prosperous surgeon had been operated upon for the removal of an organ which has now become somewhat passe—the appendix—and, while he was recovering consciousness, a fire broke out in a building across the street from the hospital.

It is always considered advisable, at such times, to prevent a patient being subjected to shock when he is emerging from the ether, and so, when the man of whom I am telling regained consciousness, he found the shades of his room tightly drawn. He could see that night had not yet fallen, and was consequently curious to know why the shades had been pulled down. The nurse tried to evade his questions, but he insisted on knowing the facts—he was probably a fire prevention engineer—so finally the nurse surrendered, saying: "The doctor told me to draw the shades because there is a fire across the street, and he was afraid that when you saw the flames, you would think the operation had been a failure."

The casual observer might think, in view of the tremendous losses by fire that the United States suffered during 1921, and the preceding year— a total of property destruction approximating \$1,000,000,000 for the two years— that fire prevention had been a failure.

This huge sum, I may say, parenthetically, is equivalent to the wages of 1,000 men, working at \$1.50 an hour, well over 666,000 consecutive hours, or approximately seventy-six years. If this period were figured upon the basis of a forty-eight hour week, the time would extend over 267 years. It is estimated further that during these two years, 30,000 persons lost their lives in fires, and that 34,000 were injured, most of the victims being women and small children.

In frankly contrasting fire losses with fire prevention, I may seem to be introducing a skeleton at our feast of reason, but I am not; I am simply turning on the limelight so that the different phases of the matter may be brought to view and any possible doubts regarding the accomplishments of fire prevention laid at rest. Considering our mounting fire losses, I know that to some it must appear that fire prevention has fallen short of its mark. Of course it has, for its mark is the bull's eye of perfection—a lofty aim in this finite world— but there is no reason why we should refrain from looking up at the sky just because we cannot reach it.

We know that complete fire safety is possible and has been achieved in individual structures, and that, in spite of the generally unfavorable picture, much has really been accomplished, both in engineering and in educational work.

If it had not been for the unremitting efforts of the National Fire Protection Association, the National Board of Fire Underwriters and other organizations working toward the same end, the fire losses might have become too heavy a burden for the nation to carry.

We know, where individual plants install sprinklers, erect fire walls and institute other safeguards, that the spread of fire is definitely restricted; that where cities have adopted our building codes, improved their water supply and fire fighting apparatus, and have created fire prevention bureaus— and the number of such cities is increasing every day—life and property are safer from destruction by fire than they were before.

Never was such wide-spread interest and enthusiasm displayed in observing Fire Prevention Day, as that manifested last October. The efforts of the national forces for fire prevention received unusual cooperation from United States Government bureaus, governors, state fire marshals, fire chiefs, school authorities, chambers of commerce, civic organizations, insurance agents and the newspapers. We were fortunate in obtaining from President Harding a strong Fire Prevention Day Proclamation, which greatly aided the campaign.

A notable factor of the Fire Prevention Day campaign of 1921 was the large amount of space devoted to the occasion by the dailies of the country, which gave more editorial attention to it than ever before. This may be taken to indicate that the newspapers of the United States have come to recognize that the fire waste which we suffer, is an economic loss burdening all of us, and since it is so largely preventable, signifies a criminal negligence on the part of our people.

There are, of course, exceptions to this editorial discernment. I recall that one newspaper in the South referred to a fire which had destroyed the greater part of a Florida town, as a "blessing in disguise," for the reason that the buildings involved were of frame construction, and the town probably would be rebuilt in a more substantial manner. Following such reasoning, the World War was also a "blessing in disguise" because the devastated regions of France and Belgium will presumably be reconstructed along more modern lines than those originally followed.

If this Florida editor had realized that burned buildings and commodities are utterly destroyed, and that insurance indemnity cannot recreate wasted materials, but only provides the finances to replace them, the newspaper would never have hazarded such comment.

Counteracting the fire prevention effort throughout the country, we have had the normal factors of increased population and additional buildings to make for higher losses. As a matter of mathematical average, the more people there are, the greater the number of fires there will be, and the same is naturally true in regard to buildings. It sometimes seems to paraphrase Rudyard Kipling, that "the structures we build up one by one, we burn down two by two," but fortunately the situation is not quite as bad as that and, although it may seem impossible to those of us who are constantly confronted by fire loss statistics, there are still a few people who have never "had a fire."

The psychological aspect of our fire loss has often been remarked, and the part that the habit of carelessness plays is vividly demonstrated by the total recorded destruction of \$90,271,334 piled up during the five years from 1916 to 1920, inclusive, by the twin hazards of "Matches—Smoking." Think of such tremendous destruction of material wealth resulting solely from the misuse of matches and the careless disposal of matches and burning tobacco! It almost staggers belief, yet it is a matter of carefully compiled statistics.

In connection with this factor, I am glad to record that at least one of the tobacco companies and one match concern in the United States have joined us in educating the purchasers of their products to avoid fire. The tobacco company publishes an almanac, with a large circulation, and in the 1922 edition devotes the best part of a page to fire prevention material, saying frankly that, as large tobacco distributors they wish "to stand as leaders in the movement to educate the smoker to the danger of carelessness." The match concern is now inserting in the boxes of its products, small slips containing the following admonition: "Never neglect precautions. Put out your matches and your smokes before throwing them away." A Canadian cigarette packer has also stepped into line and is enclosing in his packages a red slip of printed fire warnings. Some business men have the notion that if they mention hazard in connection with their products, it may reduce their sales. Really worthwhile goods, however, will never suffer because of an intelligent word of precaution as to their proper use.

Some of the electrical equipment companies now distribute a folder of instructions for the safe use of flatirons and other appliances. But these instructions are ingeniously worded and lack what might be termed "punch" because they do not tell what may happen if the rules are disregarded. What they are now doing, however, is another step forward, and deserves commendation.

Why should not other industries follow suit? For example, why would it not be fitting for the man who sells furnaces and stoves to instruct his customers in the rudiments of fire prevention as it relates to his products. He could advise users of the necessity for cleaning out smoke-pipes and flues at least once a year; for seeing that all pipes conveying heat are set a safe distance from combustible surfaces, and could dwell upon the advantages of using metal barrels for ashes and coals."

There is an equal opportunity in many different occupancies; the hotel keeper, the theatre manager, the garage proprietor— all could aid materially in educating their patrons to prevent fire.

I believe that eventually we shall see such co-operation on every hand . It is possible, even now, to sense considerably enhanced interest in fire prevention among business men.

*I have mentioned two normal influences that have tended to increase fire losses during the past few years, and of course there has been the additional effect of the post-war relaxation. However, we have been fighting against still another factor—the man who tries to "burn for profit"—the despicable individual with an asbestos conscience—who, when business reverses stare him in the face, applies the torch to his stock of goods in an effort to transfer his losses to the shoulders of society. Apparently he neither considers that his act may result in the sacrifice of life, nor cares if it does. Obviously the thought of property destruction does not bother him. During the last two years there has been ample evidence of the activities of such persons. **Whenever depression has become acute in certain trades, an epidemic of fires has followed.** In some cities, usually manufacturing centers, the epidemic has been more virulent than in others, although it is safe to say that in 1920 and 1921 fire marshals all over the Union experienced the most active periods of their busy careers. I don't wish to dwell unduly upon this factor in our huge fire loss total, but I am divulging no secret when I say that it has been serious.*

It is a sad commentary upon our business world that the moral hazard becomes so conspicuous in times of stress. Of course, the moral hazard includes not only out-and-out incendiarism but also careless habits of maintenance. This latter phase of the situation developed to an unusual degree shortly after the war, so that we had a good many of what might be called "unconscious incendiaries". Among these were the business men who, in the face of trade depression and disappearing profits, relaxed their former vigilance in regard to fire. They neglected safeguards, allowed rubbish to accumulate, postponed repairs to heating and lighting apparatus, forgot to have inspections made, and became generally careless. Their employe[e]s naturally reflected this mental attitude and likewise grew careless. The wage earner out of work became more negligent at home, and also helped to swell the fire damage which was added day by day to our national total.

The major part of our waste by burning is really an outgrowth of the mistaken viewpoint of the general public in regard to fire. I have mentioned the partial awakening that has taken place, but too many persons still think that only the fire insurance companies should worry when a fire occurs. They do not stop to consider that the institution of insurance is simply a form of protection for which the many contribute to pay the losses of the comparative few.

At present, the public is heavily taxed, both as to real estate and income, and is continually bewailing the fact. Yet few stop to consider the part which the fire waste plays in increasing these taxes; that when buildings are destroyed by fire, and not rebuilt, the taxes those properties would have yielded, are added, pro rata, to the remaining structures. Neither do they realize that localities where many fires occur must maintain large fire departments, with increased budgets for men and equipment, water supply, alarm systems and other necessary items of defense.

There are seemingly few who grasp the fact of loss which a community suffers when a plant or a factory burns; employe[e]s are thrown out of work, trade is lost to competitors, and frequently operatives are compelled to migrate to other cities to secure employment.

Take the recent Chicago conflagration, for example, which caused some 25,000 persons to lose their employment. Would anyone attempt to argue that retail business in the City of Chicago will not be affected by this catastrophe? These are matters seldom considered by the man in the street, except when he is personally affected.

Because of the difficulty of changing the habits of the adults, this Association, and the National Board of Fire Underwriters, are directing a great deal of effort toward educating the younger generation in fire prevention, and the subject is now being studied in thousands of classrooms throughout the United States, and in Canada. Very definite progress has been made in this field, but it is naturally one in which the effects will only be apparent in the future. In touching upon this work, I want to say that it is one of the most important in which we are engaged, for the lessons in carefulness absorbed in childhood will leave a life-long impression.

Another matter indicating progress is found in the gradual extension of the doctrine of personal liability for fire. Laws embodying this provision have now been placed upon the statute books of a number of cities and of the State of Pennsylvania. This is a measure long advocated and promoted by this organization and one that is certain to have far reaching effects. With public sentiment whole-heartedly behind it, personal liability for fire may become the law of the Nation, as it is on the Continent of Europe. To the average citizen who looks upon fire in a casual, disinterested fashion, such legislation may seem drastic; but it is undoubtedly the most telling way of causing people to realize what public carelessness in regard to fire means to the welfare of the community, and to the country. The need for personal liability is going to bring about an extension of its application—all our fire prevention educational work, in fact, is directly or indirectly a prelude to such legislation.

We need not, however, await future events to illuminate the value of the technical work of our Association. Engineers and architects now generally observe our requirements when drawing plans and specifications; the manufacturer desiring to install some new process immediately writes to find out if the National Fire Protection Association has investigated this subject; if a school or other place of public assemblage is to be built, our requirements for exits and fire escapes will very likely be used as a guide in planning these features and, if the architect neglects to do so, it will probably be brought to his attention by the fire chief or fire marshal. Look through the reports of the British, French and other foreign committees' investigation of accidents, or hearings held in connection with regulations to be drawn up around any hazardous trade or special type of building; prominent among the authorities quoted will be the National Fire Protection Association of America.

The work of the committees has been so extensive and their investigations so far reaching, or in other words, their investigations have necessitated contact with so many individuals, organizations and societies that so far as fire prevention and protection are concerned, the National Fire Protection Association is immediately thought of when the general subject of fire protection and prevention is considered. Through this association the best engineering knowledge of the world concerning fire hazard finds expression in an effort for the general economic good. Probably it is safe to say that never in any other field has there been such intense and continuous application to nation-wide problems. Our standards of practice are acknowledged to be the best that can be drawn up.

The policy of conferring with the industries affected has won respect and co-operation, with the result that the work of the committees has generally effected important improvements in engineering design as well as in the establishment of reliable safeguards against the fire hazard.

Some of you are probably familiar with the story of the countryman who, when roused from a sound sleep by the clanging of a fire engine at three o'clock one morning, rushed out of his house to discover the cause of the clamor.

A neighbor who was asked what was the matter yelled: "Fire! John Mason's house."

The countryman was disgusted. "This is a hell of a time to have a fire," he said.

One of these days the public will look upon all fires, at whatever hour of the day or night they may occur, with that same feeling of intolerance; and it is a part of the work of the National Fire Protection Association to bring about this viewpoint.

There has been a steady growth in our membership, both here and in Canada, and I believe, as already stated, that we are constantly accomplishing larger results.

Before resuming my place in the ranks of my fellow members, I want to express a word of appreciation of the co-operation received during my term of office. I appreciate the honor of having served as your President for the past two years, and throughout that period, as well as during previous years, I have been impressed by the sense of earnest endeavor displayed by our membership as a whole.

During its twenty-six years of existence, the National Fire Protection Association has been an increasing force in fire prevention, largely as a consequence of the direction of our able Secretary and Treasurer, Mr. Franklin H. Wentworth, whose efficient administration is well known to all of you.

In 1919 we met in Ottawa; in 1920 our meeting place was Chicago. Last year we gathered together in San Francisco, and received a generous welcome from our friends on the Pacific Coast. This year we are holding our convention on the Atlantic seaboard. To my mind, this is an indication of the extent of our activities and the widespread interest in our work.

I believe, however, that we can increase our membership still further by inviting chambers of commerce, Rotary, and Kiwanis Clubs and other local business organizations, as well as business men generally, to become affiliated with us. They should become interested in the work of the National Fire Protection Association, and many would doubtless do so were they better acquainted with our aims. The fee involved is nominal and the benefits derived are large.

We have the organization, and with an augmented membership, built up with the co-operation of all, we shall have a powerful force to combat the heavy destruction of life and property by fire.

The colossal fire waste is endangering our economic future, but a large portion of the public does not realize it. Consequently our people must be taught in the press, in the schools, and by public speaking; first the unnecessary burden imposed by preventable fire, and second, the way in which to eliminate it.

Chairman Lacount: We have listened with interest and profit to this very excellent address by our president. What is your pleasure respecting it?

Secretary Wentworth: I have asked the unusual privilege on behalf of the secretary of moving the acceptance of the president's address. The address speaks for itself; its thoughtfulness and understanding of our problems and work are obvious. I know there are many members of the association who might do greater credit to a discussion of it than I. I have not risen for that purpose. I ask this privilege because there are phases of the president's work that the members are not qualified to understand as the everyday man on the job, the secretary, is qualified to understand them. We all know that in an association like ours in which so many earnest men co-operate (which almost runs under its own power, you might say) a president may be active or he may be inactive, and the members cannot directly understand just what his contribution may be. I think most of the members of this organization have some idea of what a busy man Mr. Mallalieu is; what heavy responsibilities he carries. One has only to go into his office to see that very clearly; to understand the significance of the row of people waiting in line to see him throughout the day. Only a man exceedingly efficient in handling big affairs could possibly carry his burden. Now, knowing that fact and understanding it as I do, I wish to pay him the tribute of a most profound admiration for his unflagging interest in the work of our association. Every problem that has come up, and there have been many in the two years of his administration, has immediately engaged his careful and thoughtful attention. He has never been too busy in office hours or out of office hours to give thought and action to the need and work of the National Fire Protection Association. I know this better than anyone else knows it. That is why I asked the privilege of paying a personal tribute to Mr. Mallalieu as I move the acceptance of the president's report. (Applause.)

The motion was unanimously adopted.”

While the President's Address in 1922 was rather mundane, this appears to be an indication that the National Fire Protection Association was “running like a well-oiled machine”.

* * * * *

Copyright © 2013
Richard C. Schulte

Source: “*Proceedings of the Twenty-sixth Annual [NFPA] Meeting*”, Atlantic City, New Jersey, 1922.