

## FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 186: 1918 (WORLD WAR I)

By Richard Schulte

The war which engulfed Europe in 1914 continued into 1918. America entered the war in 1917. The presentation given by Wilbur Mallalieu at the twenty-second Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association held in 1918 gave a brief summary of fire prevention and fire prevention work which aided the war effort. The following is a transcript of this presentation:

### ***“The Public Service of the Fire Underwriter in War Time.*”**

*Address by Mr. Wilbur E. Mallalieu, of New York,  
General Manager,  
National Board of Fire Underwriters.*

*The nation's call to war-time service has met with such hearty response on the part of most professions and lines of business, that the underwriters do not wish to claim any disproportionate credit for themselves. They have constituted but one of the many channels through which our national spirit has expressed itself. Yet, they have had their own peculiar part to play, and a brief summary of events that to us have been epoch-making may not be out of place.*

*On March 21, 1917, it required no especial gift of prophecy to see that the United States was about to find itself at war. Many people and many institutions were suddenly looking the situation in the face as a personal matter, and were asking themselves the question, "What part must I play?" In all this multitude, The National Board of Fire Underwriters felt that there rested upon it the burden of a peculiar responsibility, although the thought presented itself less as a burden than as one of opportunity for service.*

*It need hardly be said today that the United States, with its long traditions of peace, was at that time almost entirely unprepared for its part in the struggle. Our vast industrial resources were a mere collection of units and not the single organized machine toward which they are now evolving. The three immediate problems were man-power, finance, and supplies.*

*Securing supplies was by no means the least of these; it must be based upon the most minute knowledge of sources of supply, and the huge task of investigating and classifying such sources in a nation as large as the United States would naturally involve months of delay in the placing of orders. Every day was precious. A short cut was imperative. Fortunately there chanced to be one widely organized business which was already possessed of this information. The fire insurance companies operate in every section of every State. They have relations with almost every owner of property, and these relations necessitate the acquirement of exact knowledge concerning the property to be insured.*

*The National Board was in position to organize this priceless data and make it available for the nation's needs. Perhaps we may be entitled to a little credit for the fact that this conclusion was reached, and these resources were tendered to the Government, by purely voluntary action, upon the date already mentioned, sixteen days before the declaration of war. Needless to say, acceptance was prompt and cordial; the officials were more than eager. Work was got under way with such speed that the names of hundreds of factories available to produce munitions were placed in the hands of the government within the few days intervening before Congress voted war.*

*There is no need to enlarge upon the detail by which these results were made possible. Most big undertakings require systematizing upon a large scale, but a rather interesting psychological effect was produced in our own offices. It was as though someone without warning had pulled a lever and thrown the clutch into a new set of gears. We had all of us been working steadily upon our familiar tasks. We believed our work to be of great importance to the public, and knew that we were giving it our best endeavors, when, suddenly, there appeared this new task, so imperative as to require the absolute right-of-way. Many of our activities, therefore, stopped with something of a jolt, and with a hastily improvised force, drawn from other service, we commenced to aid the nation in its direct preparations for battle. We began to wonder whether we were really insurance people, after all.*

*In retrospect now, after more than a year, we can see that this was only the beginning, although it loomed large at the time. It was, in fact, no small affair, for in the few months which followed, we supplied to the Government complete data upon more than 13,000 separate manufacturing plants, each one able to fit into the vital scheme of war-time supplies. We know that the United States placed orders quickly with many of these plants; we, therefore, believe our efforts contributed toward giving the nation a more prompt preparedness for war work than would have been possible without them.*

*Closely upon the heels of this information service, came another of hardly less importance. In a sense, it was somewhat analagous to the health work among the troops. In this war, as never before, it is realized that it is not sufficient to have mere numbers of men in the armies. These men must be kept as "effectives." A man on his back in a hospital is a liability, not an asset— wherefore there have come about the provisions for gas masks, anti-typhus vaccine, and other protective measures calculated to keep the soldier fit for fighting.*

*The fire insurance interests felt that they could assist in keeping the American factories fit for fighting, through acting upon the theory that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Fire is a common factory disease. It is all too prevalent in every year, but under wartime conditions, it began to resemble an epidemic. Naturally, the newspapers and the public assumed that these numerous industrial fires were largely chargeable to "German spies."*

*Investigations made by The National Board of Fire Underwriters, through its Committee on Arson and its Actuarial Bureau, have largely disproved this idea, and have thrown increased emphasis upon the fact that abnormal conditions of production, in themselves, have caused a great increase in fire hazard.*

*When this fact was made public, it proved a disappointment to many who were expecting the more sensational explanation. They were something like the Irishman, who said to his small son, "Mickey, sthoph makin' thot noise." Mickey answered, "I'm not makin' any noise, fayther," and father said, "Well, make some, thin, don't be sthandin' there quiet, makin' your fayther out a loiar."*

*The ardent zeal of many of our patriots would almost have welcomed the evidence that German spies with torches were effecting great destruction. It was somewhat disconcerting to have the responsibility traced to Germany's chief ally on this side of the ocean— good old American Carelessness. In this case, however, there was a natural explanation, although not an excuse.*

*So great was the concentration of thought upon the subject of production that conservation was temporarily overlooked and, as a consequence, these highly speeded factories, grain elevators, and the like, began to burn with even more than their usual frequency.*

*Please do not understand that I am underestimating the incendiary ambitions of the spy in this country, nor deprecating the need for vigilance. Far from it! His evil intent has been shown in many ways, and if he has met with less success in the matter of fires than he doubtless hoped for, this fact in itself, is attributable to the value of vigilance.*

*But, oh, if people would only learn to exercise similar vigilance against themselves! If they could only appreciate the amazing degree to which their own carelessness "gives aid and comfort to the enemy!" Perhaps it would help them, could they visualize this carelessness in the form of an enemy alien, with their own features changed into Teutonic mold, with spiked helmets upon their own heads, with flaming torches in their own right hands, and iron crosses pinned upon their own breasts. If they could see this true picture of their carelessness personified, it might shock them into reform.*

*The National Board realized that the industrial fire loss menace had become acute; it undertook to see what could be done toward keeping America's supply plants in the industrial trenches. In co-operation with the Council of National Defense, with other fire insurance organizations, and with many local and state officials, it organized and directed a nation-wide campaign, employing the services of some 3,500 inspectors and surveyors, operating under various State executive committees. In some States, these inspectors were given an official standing by commissions from the Government.*

*Within the next few months, there were literally tens of thousands of American factories, grain elevators, flour mills, warehouses, cotton compresses, saw mills, fertilizer works, piers and similar premises individually inspected by men who had received special training in the detection and correction of fire hazards. These men received their salaries from the fire insurance companies, but they were definitely instructed, while engaged in this task, to "forget that they were insurance men," and remember only that they were performing a public service in conserving the national resources.*

*It is a trifle difficult to appraise the exact results of this work, although we endeavored to indicate some of its bearings a few months ago, in a bulletin entitled "The Fires That Did Not Occur." Certain it is that industrial fires have by no means been eliminated, but it is equally certain that in countless instances, the visit of the inspector has been followed by prompt correction of the hazards discovered by him. We firmly believe that innumerable factories, grain elevators, and other places of production or storage, are now in the nation's industrial trenches instead of its hospitals or graveyards, because of the work done in this campaign. Many of this highly efficient army of inspectors are here today. Their services have been no less effective for the cause of liberty than those of our boys in the trenches.*

*This work has now been given a permanent official standing by the Federal Government through the establishment of a Fire Prevention Section of the War Industries Board, operating directly from its offices in Washington. This Section is under the direct supervision of men of the highest standing in both the stock and mutual fire insurance companies. There has been some misunderstanding of the exact function of this new Section. It is not intended in any way to disturb existing agencies where the inspection work that they are doing is satisfactory. In fact, the efforts of the Section will be directed principally toward improving conditions in certain privately owned plants where munitions needed by the Government are being produced under unnecessarily hazardous conditions. There are, perhaps, from one to two hundred of these plants, and war-time needs demand that they be safeguarded as swiftly and completely as possible.*

*All organizations and individuals interested in the subject of fire protection are urged to co-operate by reporting upon any plants of which they may happen to know. The whole subject of safeguarding our sources of supply in this highly industrialized war is so vast that the combined efforts of all who may contribute will still fall short of complete protection. It is a field of patriotic service which cannot be overcrowded.*

*Almost simultaneously with the creation of this Section, there came another development of unusual interest. This was the establishment of a Fire Prevention Bureau of The National Board of Fire Underwriters, in the War Department at Washington, by the order of the Acting Secretary of War, Mr. Benedict Crowell. The purpose of this Bureau is to co-operate with the War Department in all matters concerning fire prevention and protection, so far as they relate to the construction and leasing of buildings for the Department's use.*

*It is somewhat difficult to combine justice to my subject with consideration for my hearers. I have been asked to cover the national service work of our organization, but realize that there are also other speakers who have a claim upon your time. Details, therefore, must be ruthlessly lopped off in giving the merest glimpse of some of the other forms of activity.*

*Take, for example, our work at the army cantonments.*

*Have you visited one of these cantonments? If so, flash it before your eyes in a mental picture, since it represents one of the most interesting experiments in construction ever undertaken.*

*Your mental picture shows you a far stretching wooden city of the hastiest possible erection. We have just been talking about the necessity for keeping our factories in the trenches, by safeguarding them from fire. Well, one of these cantonments is to be regarded less as a city than as a factory— an army factory. It receives its raw material— and some of it is pretty raw— and it turns out a splendid product in the form of those khaki-clad battalions of which we are all so proud.*

*Can you imagine what a conflagration would do to such a great wooden factory of armies? As professional fire protection engineers you have doubtless contemplated such a disaster every time you have seen such a group of buildings. I assure you, it was one of the first things of which we thought when the Government's encampment proposition was made known to us. Some of our people believed that in spite of all precedent, these apparently tinder-box cities could be made virtually conflagration-proof. The War Department invited us to try our hand at it. Therefore, while the camp sites were yet uncleared, there began the preparation of the plans for construction. National Board engineers, drafted from our Committee on Fire Prevention, were given offices with the Construction Division of the Quartermaster's Department in Washington, and their ideas were incorporated with these plans, while yet on paper. The results speak for themselves.*

*Each encampment has an adequate water system. Each one is equipped with a fire fighting force and apparatus, operating from conveniently disposed fire houses. The alarm system is complete; heating and lighting installations have been safeguarded. All of the buildings contain fire buckets and extinguishers. They are sufficiently separated to reduce exposure, and are covered with fire-resistive roofing. Safety rules have been worked out, regular inspections organized, and in short, there has been undertaken all that foresight could suggest as reasonable in the way of eliminating an almost overwhelming natural fire hazard, considering the very brief period of time allowed for the work.*

*Perhaps it would be wise to wait until the end of the war before boasting of results, but at least it may be said that the fire loss upon approximately \$100,000,000 of construction was only \$2,150 up to the time that the camps were turned over to the commanding generals. Without considering the unusual hazards of construction, such a low fire loss is probably unprecedented.*

*Never before has it been possible to try a fire prevention constructional experiment upon such a huge scale. Never have results been obtained that were more illuminating. I might add that the actual carrying out of the plans was under the eyes of members of our engineering force, one of whom was assigned to each cantonment during the whole period of erection.*

*There is not time for more than a cataloging of the rest of our national service activities. They have come under three general heads; engineering, investigating, and educational. Under each of these heads there has been an effort to do work that was definitely constructive. Fire prevention provisions have been injected into the huge plans of the Emergency Fleet Corporation, and the Bureau of Yards and Docks of the Navy Department, and inspections made of marine and of aviation encampments. Engineers and inspectors of the various underwriting organizations throughout the country, operating through the National Board and in conjunction with its engineers have inspected and issued reports upon upwards of 160 ship-yards, and the work is still in progress. They have inspected important Government buildings in Washington, where the emergency of the hour has led to various improvised office arrangements, and where serious interruption of war activities would be caused by fire. Reports have been rendered covering not only bad housekeeping; careless electrical installations and the like, but construction plans to limit the fire hazard have been furnished. Several of our officials have been compelled to make such frequent trips to the national capital that they have come to feel almost like commuters. Complete inspections of all Navy Yards, Navy and Marine training camps, and hospitals have been made and reports rendered containing hundreds of suggestions for better fire protection, both in housekeeping and construction.*

*Reference has already been made to investigations conducted by the Committee on Incendiarism and Arson. Where fires have involved the suspicion of enemy plots, this committee has been working in close cooperation with the Department of Justice and some of the other Government departments. Details of its operation are necessarily confidential, but it can be appreciated that the activity has been very great, since the beginning of the war.*

*Our educational work, on the other hand, has courted the widest publicity, and the American press, recognizing its genuinely public service character, has co-operated without stint. Probably many of you are already familiar with our "Safeguarding" series of fire prevention booklets. The first of these, "Safeguarding Industry," was prepared to give practical instruction to managers of plants in reducing fire hazard. It was issued for the Council of National Defense, and 125,000 copies were sent to important manufacturers in all parts of the country. At our request, President Wilson gave us, for use upon its cover, a signed statement that has now become famous—the one which begins, "Preventable fire is more than a private misfortune—it is a public dereliction." When these booklets were sent out, they were accompanied by an illustrated poster of specific warnings to factory hands, and also by self inspection blanks.*

*Our second booklet, "Safeguarding Grain," was issued for the Food Administration, and bore a signed statement from Mr. Hoover. It went to all of the important shippers and handlers of grain in the United States and is now commonly known throughout the west as Hoover's rules. A similar purpose among cotton compresses and warehouses was fulfilled by our booklet on "Safeguarding Cotton," for which Secretary of War Baker issued a statement.*

*Our latest is a fire prevention manual for use in grammar schools, which bears the title of "Safeguarding the Home Against Fire," and was produced for the United States Bureau of Education. The preface was written by Dr. Claxton, United States Commissioner of Education, and he is recommending it to the schools of the country for use as a text-book in the first half of the seventh grade work.*

*It is hoped that as a result of this recognition by the National Government of scientific fire protection and prevention the influence of this great force will be thrown into wider channels, so that municipalities and citizens generally will avail themselves of the services we always stand ready to freely offer for the purpose of reducing our enormous annual fire loss.*

*Such co-operation by municipalities is now partially obtained, but to secure effective participation by individuals, the work thus started must be continued, and to this end we ask the earnest co-operation of the members of the National Fire Protection Association.*

*A speaker recently said that if one would understand the difference between the "German mind and the human mind," it was necessary to consider the process of instruction by which the present generation of Germans has been psychologically created for war purposes. The world would be fundamentally out of joint if such an evil instance were to remain as our chief example of the educational possibilities of persistent propaganda. If systematic efforts, wisely planned, and patiently employed, might have an ultimate effect in altering the consciousness of the American people with respect to their great weakness of habitual carelessness, its effect would be by no means limited to the single matter of fire waste. Its value would be seen in countless desirable ways.*

*We firmly believe that this is feasible. We do not expect this to be a sudden accomplishment but we do know that underlying the carelessness and optimism of our fellow countryman there is a solid substratum of common sense. If we will plant our foundations deep enough, a permanent structure can be erected. That structure—the America of the future— should not be left to form itself in the old haphazard way. With vision enlarged, and minds made serious by the tremendous lessons of humanity's great struggle, may we not gain a truer conception of our responsibility in leaving a heritage of reconstructed national character to the generations which are to come?*



*May we not contribute toward the formation of a new America, not less happy or less surely optimistic, but one in which carelessness and the light-hearted willingness to "take a chance" shall have been replaced by conservation, efficiency, and far-sighted preparation for desired developments ?*

*If The National Fire Protection Association, and The National Board of Fire Underwriters, and all other great voluntary organizations, can conceive of their present activities in the light of these ultimate effects, a great step will have been taken toward merging the present with the future."*

From a technical standpoint, the transcript above provides little background on the origins of code and standards development, however, it is interesting to note the involvement of the National Bureau of Fire Underwriters in the war effort on the home front.

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