

## FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 247: 1918 (WILLIAM H. MERRILL AND THE WAR EFFORT)

By Richard Schulte

The twenty-second Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was held in Chicago in May 1918. Foremost on the nation's mind at that time was the war in Europe between Great Britain, France, Germany and Austria-Hungary. While the Great War broke out in 1914, the United States managed to stay out of the conflict until 1917. Once the United States entered the war, the industrial production of armaments became of primary importance. Given this, it seemed natural that the war would be a topic of discussion at this meeting of the NFPA.

The following is an excerpt of the discussion on the protection of the nation's industrial capacity in order to assist the war effort:

***The President:** The secretary has referred in his report to the number of members of this organization who have been called to important positions with the U. S. Government. It is not surprising that when the government desires fire protection engineering knowledge it should come to the National Fire Protection Association, because there is really no other place to go. Probably the most prominent and most important of those positions is that of Chairman of the Fire Prevention Section of the War Industries Board, to which office Past-president Merrill has been called. Mr. Merrill has just come in to the meeting and, while it is not on the official program, I am going to ask him to tell us something of his new responsibilities. While he is President of the Underwriters' Laboratories, whose guests we are to be tomorrow, we do not receive him today as President of the Laboratories, but as Past-president of the National Fire Protection Association. (Applause.)*

**Mr. W. H. Merrill (Chicago and Washington, D. C.):** *The Fire Prevention Section of the War Industries Board proposes to utilize in its work the local and district fire inspection services at present operating in the United States for the purpose of obtaining data on the conditions existing in respect to fire hazards in plants manufacturing munitions. Where reports obtained from these sources indicate that adequate protection against fire loss is not provided for such plants, we propose advising the Government departments contracting for supplies from these sources of the conditions existing and the proper remedies therefor, that corrective measures may be obtained by them through clauses in contracts requiring adequate fire protection in plants working on Government orders or by such other means as may be available. This does not mean that we are starting in to make a census of the munition plants of the country. In the three weeks in which this section has been in existence and organized, we have accumulated data which indicates quite clearly that there are perhaps a dozen air plane factories and perhaps ten times that number of munition plants in this country in which the fire hazard is extremely serious. These plants seem to have been built without any regard for well known principles of fire protection and fire prevention. Many of them are in such condition that through any ordinary carelessness they could be wiped off the face of the earth in an hour's time and the war program thus very seriously interfered with and delayed. As to the thousand or more other munition plants, they have been engineered and inspected by existing inspection authorities represented in this association. Safeguards have been installed under the direction of these experts, and to such plants we do not need to pay our immediate attention, but rather we are concentrating on the critical situations that are all too numerous the country over. Where circumstances warrant, we propose enlisting the aid of the fire marshals of the various states, of municipal fire prevention bureaus, of insurance boards, bureaus, associations and companies in co-operative effort for the prevention of fire loss. We propose to communicate with owners and occupants of plants making munitions, asking their co-operation in all measures tending to prevent loss by fire. We propose that for the purpose of making surveys, inspections and special investigations, only such inspectors and engineers shall be eligible for use by the Fire Prevention Section as may have been qualified and licensed by said Section; such licenses only to be issued to men concerning whom satisfactory information as to loyalty and ability has been ascertained by means of the questionnaires collected by the Treasury Department and such other investigations as the Section may devise and deem necessary. In reference to the general identification card program of the Treasury Department and the issuance of orders through the Treasury Department, which plans were contemplated but never consummated, I have issued the following notice under date of May 1<sup>st</sup>.*

### **Identification Cards.**

*Addressed to all Insurance Companies, Boards, Bureaus and Associations in the Country.*

*"The number of certificates of information submitted to the Treasury Department by insurance companies pursuant to its notice of February last had been so large as to make it impossible to conduct, within a reasonable time, such investigation as would justify the issuance of certificates of identification by the Government. Accordingly the arrangements referred to in that notice, whereby only such insurance inspectors as were licensed by the Treasury Department should be permitted access to plants, were never consummated. The Treasury Department has never issued any notice to munition factories along the lines of its original suggestion. The matter having been transferred to this section of the War Industries Board by the Treasury Department notice of April 11th, it is suggested that each insurance company issue to its own representatives over the signature of its own officers such identification cards as it may deem necessary."*

*In respect to the engineers that we hope will be available for cooperation in the work of the Fire Prevention Section, the plan as we have it at present in mind is to ask from time to time, from the various inspection bureaus and associations in the country, the loan for perhaps ten days or two weeks of their best engineers, these engineers to come to Washington to spend that time with us there, to become thoroughly acquainted with the methods of work that have been devised, acquainted with the report blanks, acquainted with exactly what we are after; these men then to return to their districts with a list of the more important munition plants which we will furnish, and through their individual efforts and through co-operation with the inspection service of which they are members, get reports in our hands which may permit of speedy action in respect to the plants in question. Permit me to emphasize the very great importance of the men who are to do this work having the fullest, most comprehensive training in all branches of fire protection engineering. Very large values are involved, very important questions have to be decided. These men must be competent not only to inspect the plant and to report on the conditions as they find it, recognizing the risk as one of a class, but they must go further and give us good engineering advice as to how to make that plant as safe as possible. This oftentimes includes the laying out of the design for the installation of division walls, because many of these plant areas are so large as to themselves constitute the principal hazard of the plant. It means an ability to lay out an automatic sprinkler equipment and all of the minor fire protection safeguards. This engineer must also be competent to give us an idea of the cost of these improvements because oftentimes the financing of the improvements will have to be carried out by the Government, and we must know whether we are facing an expenditure of Government funds of two hundred or three hundred or four hundred thousand dollars; we must know that the estimates of this engineer are accurate within reason and can be re-*

lied upon in connection with getting the necessary appropriation for the improvements. To these men who will come to Washington and will enter this service and give us this aid we are to issue identification cards and they will be in the Government service. Whether all of them will receive the celebrated dollar that is to be specially coined for those patriotic citizens who are devoting their time to work in Washington or not, I cannot today state, but it is my hope that they may. We propose to ask from the several governmental departments such as the Army Intelligence Bureau, the Navy Intelligence Bureau, etc., copies of records which they have thus far collected with respect to the physical conditions of munition plants and a list of all such properties that all work of the character assigned to the Fire Prevention Section may be co-ordinated and be available to the War Industries Board and to any department authorized to make contracts on behalf of the Government. We desire to be promptly informed of all important contracts for munitions that may be awarded, that inspections of plants and recommendations for fire protection therein may be made through this Section. We have requested the cordial co-operation of all departments and bureaus of the Government which in the course of their work may secure data on fire hazards covering plants making munitions through prompt advices to the Section that effort may at once be made to remove hazardous conditions. I am very much gratified to be able to report that up to the present time we have received the most cordial co-operation and support from all branches of the Government. We have weekly meetings in Washington at which all of the principal departments of the Government interested in munition plants and in contracts are represented by executive officers, and these include the Treasury Department, the War Department, the Army Ordnance, the Navy Department, the Department of Justice, the Shipping Board, the Food Administration and the Housing Division of the Labor Department. All of these officials are very much interested in this work and are spending the necessary time to be fully acquainted with all of its details as it goes forward and are giving us the fullest measure of co-operation and support. We are depending on the members of the N. F. P. A. to help in conscientious constructive work in this effort. It so happens that it came about rather oddly that two members of the class of '89 of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, of Boston, were appointed to the executive committee of this Board, Mr. Frank L. Pierce and the speaker. When we met in Washington and found that we were commandeered for the same job, we remembered the motto of the class of '89. It was "'89 has done her duty as usual." We hope to carry that motto forward in Government Work and we know that you are going to help us and support us. (Applause.)

**The President:** We are extremely fortunate in having Mr. Merrill with us this morning to give us this interesting first-hand information regarding this important Government work. I assume that Mr. Merrill will have no objections to answering any queries the members would care to put to him.

**Mr. Hutson:** *Won't you kindly ask Mr. Merrill to explain to the assembly the word munitions? It is a great deal broader I think than is generally understood.*

**Mr. Merrill:** *The word munitions, as used, is broadly defined as including all materials, machinery and supplies used for war purposes. " 'Munitions plants' include all private properties where munitions are manufactured, handled or stored."*

**Mr. Dana:** *I would like to ask Mr. Merrill whether the original plan of the Treasury Department that all munition plants require inspectors to have a Government pass is going to be put into effect by his Section?*

**Mr. Merrill:** *No sir. The original plan of the Treasury Department, as I stated, was never carried out; no orders were ever issued by the Treasury Department to plant owners even suggesting that insurance inspectors should have a Government label before they were to be admitted to the plant. The question of guarding the plant is primarily in the hands of the plant owners, and in some places, of course, plants are guarded by various branches of the Government. Unfortunately the practice varies in many localities. Quite recently here in Chicago I heard my good friend, Chief McDonnell, tell at an evening meeting that he had no difficulty in walking through a number of food storage plants in Chicago without his uniform and without anybody stopping him to ask what his business was. On the other hand, I am reliably informed that the only way to get into the Bethlehem Steel Works is to go by aeroplane and drop into that plant. Mr. Schwab's signature is necessary before anybody not connected with that enterprise can be admitted to the plant. There are the two extremes, but so far as the Treasury Department is concerned and so far as the War Industries Board is concerned, there are no restrictions. The scheme for making identification cards has been abandoned except in so far as it may apply to certain engineers who come into the Government service, and then we will identify them, not as insurance inspectors but as inspectors for the Government. Is that clear, Mr. Dana?*

**Mr. Dana:** *It is unfortunate that the report has got around among many of the munition workers that this pass was required and they are looking for it.*

**Mr. Merrill:** *Quite so. We are trying to give as much publicity to the action of the Fire Prevention Section of the War Industries Board on this matter as was given to the contemplated action of the Treasury Department.*

**Mr. Edward R. Hardy (New York Fire Insurance Exchange):** *The question of storage in New York is important. I have in mind plants which have stores for the Allies. I wonder whether the Section takes those into consideration? Are those under your purview?*

**Mr. Merrill:** *I repeat "Munitions plants, as used in the foregoing, is broadly defined as including all private properties where munitions are manufactured, handled or stored."*

**Mr. Thomas R. Weddell (The Union):** *Mr. Merrill spoke of conferences with the Housing Board. I would like to inquire if he knows whether the Housing Board has any supervision over fire prevention inspection in those new industrial divisions?*

**Mr. Merrill:** *The Housing Division of the Labor Department, I understand, is very much interested in the question of fire protection.*

*The Division has a very extensive program, involving the expenditure of a good many million dollars, and I understand is exceedingly alive and interested in this subject. Thank you for the opportunity to be with you today, Mr. President. (Applause.)*

**The President:** *I assure you, Mr. Merrill, we are very grateful for your address. The next order is the report of the Membership Committee. The Chairman is not present. The report will be read by Mr. Colyer."*

While a discussion of the war effort was of great importance at the NFPA Annual Meeting held in 1918, within 6 months, the Great War was over with an armistice declared on November 11, 1918. With the Armistice declared, the NFPA went back to its normal work of addressing the nation's fire problem.

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