

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 48: 1912 (FIRE PREVENTION DAY/PRESIDENT TAFT)

By Richard Schulte

The 46th annual meeting of The National Board of Fire Underwriters (NBFU) took place at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York City on May 23, 1912. The meeting included an address by the president of the NBFU, George W. Babb. The following is an excerpt from the NBFU president's address at the 1912 meeting:

"FIRE PREVENTION AND CONSERVATION.

While a reasonable and justifiable self-interest has prompted and still prompts the maintenance of the Board and its activities, it is, nevertheless, the fact that all it does and seeks to do is equally for the benefit of the public, and has been so adjudged by its legislative investigators. This has become more generally known and recognized, as also its preparedness to offer expert advice over a wide range of subjects through trained specialists. The National Board of Fire Underwriters has come to be recognized as being allied to, or sustaining some relation to, civic bodies, and receives invitations to cooperate with such bodies in measured for the public welfare, some of which it has to decline on accounted of being foreign to its objects and proper functions.

The services of our engineers are sought and utilized for the benefit of the public as well as the members of this Board. They have prepared a model State Fire Marshal Law; in conjunction with the National Fire Protection Association have formulated state and municipal fire prevention ordinances on matches, inflammable fluids, explosives and combustibles; prepared questions for use in the examination held for the selection, by promotion, of Chief of the New York Fire Department; have been, and are being, consulted in the planning of the fire protection facilities of the Panama-Pacific Exposition; and have answered technical inquires received from many municipal water works and fire department officials. The advice given by one of our engineers to the Commission having charge of the installation of the Boston High Pressure Fire Service brought out a request for his services during construction, and, recognizing the importance of the work, your Executive Committee granted the engineer leave of absence. The Managers of the Panama-Pacific Exposition have requested the continuous service of one of our engineers to superintend the installation of their fire protection system, and if terms be arranged between the engineer and the exposition authorities, leave of absence will be granted that engineer also. These cases show it to be quite commonly understood that the National Board is equipped to furnish such experts, and the circumstance that there service are desired during the period of construction, and perhaps longer, indicates that they have created confidence in their competency.

The Association of Fire Marshals of North America and the National Convention of Insurance Commissioners at their last annual sessions adopted resolutions asking the Governors of the states to set apart a "Fire Prevention Day," and seek to have it observed as "an important, practical and educational assistance in the work of fire prevention." Some States, through the Fire Marshal's Office, are requiring the instruction of pupils in public, private and parochial schools in fire dangers, and means of prevention.

The Conference of Governors held at Spring Lake, N. J., in September, appeared to present an opportunity to invite consideration of the fire loss of the country, and to advocate establishment by proclamation of a Fire Prevention (or Clean-Up) Day, but the nature of the Conference did not permit our representatives being heard. Your President, did, however, write to all Governors who had not been addressed on the subject by other territorial organizations, advocating the issuance of a proclamation setting apart a "Fire Prevention Day." The suggestion was well received by many of the Governors addressed and adopted by some. It is gratifying to note that the following named States observed a "Fire Prevention Day": Arkansas, California, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, Vermont and Wisconsin.

The fire prevention work of the National Fire Protection Association, the National Association of Credit Men, and the several State Fire Prevention Associations, deserve special commendation. During the year representatives of the two first named associations made a country wide trip delivering addresses before colleges, institutions of learning and assemblages of business men, preaching the cause of fire prevention and individual responsibility for preventable fires. The latter associations are doing practical work organizing and directing "clean-up" days in individual cities and towns.

The Committee on Construction of Buildings is frequently called upon by municipal officials for aid in revising building codes and regulations or creating new ones. Professor Woolson has given a very large amount of time during the past year to a proposed new code for the City of New York. I do not wish to encroach on the prerogatives of our able committee having immediate charge of this work, whose report you will soon be hearing, and will only say further that I consider this work of the supremest importance. It has been conducted in a manner to reflect great credit on the Board and we may well view it with satisfaction and pride.

The work of your Fire Prevention Committee and its engineers proceeds with progressive efficiency. There is a demand for more work than the engineering staff can perform, and the amount of work done that is desired is practically limited only by the appropriation which the Board deems it wise to vote for the purpose.

A progressive development of fire prevention work has occurred since your several committees on "Statistics" obtained, collated, and published comparative figures of the fire waste in this country and in Europe. The presentations have evidently made a vivid impression. These reports have been reinforced by the conservation work of the Board, and the papers it has presented at annual meetings of the Conservation Congress. At the third session held in Kansas City in September last we presented a paper entitled "Preventable Fire Waste – Conservation Efforts for Its Reduction," which received a wide distribution. The Conservation Congress has created an "Advisory Board," and, in response to an invitation to be represented thereon, our General Agent has been delegated to so act.

During the year the Board received a request from the Chairman of the Public Buildings and Ground Committee of the National House of Representatives for advice and assistance in establishing systematic fire prevention regulations for safeguarding public buildings and their valuable contents, and the lives of those employed in them. By request of the Executive Committee, your President went to Washington in company with Mr. W. H. Merrill, President of the National Fire Protection Association, which association had received a similar request for assistance, and appeared before the Committee. After the conference the Committee of the House expressed their appreciation of the courtesy shown them by the National Board and National Fire Protection Association, and stated they had been materially helped, and expressed a desire to be permitted to ask for further advice and assistance in the future. President Taft was called on in connection with the subject and found to be interested in the matter of excessive fire waste which afflicts our country. He has since made the following statements:

"Much of the loss of life and property by fire in the United States is undoubtedly preventable. The extent and nature of our fire losses manifestly bring the question of fire waste prominently forward in connection with conservation effort."

"Those organizations which are bringing the loss of life and property by fire in the United States prominently to the attention of the people should be encouraged in this effort to the end that preventable fires may diminish in number."

This portion of NBFU president's address contains a number of noteworthy items. Of particular interest is the reference to "*Fire Prevention Day*" and the statement on fire prevention by the President of the United States, William Howard Taft (27th President of the United States, 1909-1913).

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