

# SCHULTE & ASSOCIATES

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## **FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 61: 1909 (THIRTEENTH ANNUAL MEETING- THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS)**

By Richard Schulte

The thirteenth annual meeting of the National Fire Protection took place in New York in 1909. As was the custom, the meeting opened with an address by the president of the Association. The following is the text of the president's address:

*"The Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was convened at the appointed hour in the Assembly Room of the New York Board of Fire Underwriters, 32 Nassau street, New York City, with President, Mr. C. M. Goddard, in the chair, and a very large attendance.*

*The Chair: Will the gentlemen please come to order, and the Secretary will call the roll of active members.*

*Following is the roll of those present as shown by responses to the roll call by Secretary Merrill, together with registration by cards during the session.*

[attendees listed]

### **Honorary Life Members**

*William A. Anderson, Superintendent, New York Board of Fire Underwriters, 32 Nassau Street, New York, N. Y.*

*Uberto C. Crosby, United States Manager, Royal Exchange Assurance, 92 William Street, New York, N. Y.*

*The Secretary: There is a quorum, Mr. President.*

*The Chair: Gentlemen, a quorum being present, we will proceed with the regular order of business, and I will ask Mr. H. C. Henley, Vice President to take the chair.*

*The Vice President, Mr. Henley, presiding.*

*The Chair: Gentlemen, the next thing in order is the presentation of the President's annual address.*

## PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

Mr. Goddard thereupon addressed the convention as follows:

GENTLEMEN OF THE NATIONAL FIRE PROTECTION ASSOCIATION: -- It has afforded me great pleasure to be actively in association with the members of our present administration, and it affords me equal pleasure to welcome you all to this thirteenth annual meeting of our association. *When one contrasts this gathering with the meeting held in the small director's room of one of the New York fire insurance companies some thirteen years ago, you may be assured that the possibilities of the results of that preliminary meeting never entered the mind of a single person present.*

The report of the Chairman of your Executive Committee will cover the details of the past year's work, and it is my purpose to refer to but a single phase of this work, because I believe that the possibilities of results in that direction may far exceed our anticipations as has our growth of this association exceeded the anticipations of its founders.

*Our fire loss has averaged \$250,000,000 a year for the past five or six years, and approximately 3,000 Americans lose their lives every year by fire. Estimates place the destruction of our forests by fire last Fall at the rate of a million dollars a day for many weeks.*

A well informed magazine writer in speaking of the probabilities of serious conflagration losses, says:

*"Our cities are now so very wooden that the fate that overtook Chicago, Baltimore, San Francisco, and a portion of Boston, will as inevitably overtake and devastate large portions of every one of our cities."*

The editor of "Engineering News", in a paper read before a joint meeting of the four great national engineering societies, uses a striking illustration of our building fires, when he says that if the 165,000 buildings which are destroyed or damaged by fire in this country each year were allowed a frontage of only sixty-five feet each they would line both sides of a street reaching from New York to Chicago, and that street is being attacked by fire at the rate of three miles each day. In other words, if our fires were concentrated, we would find that we had a very respectable daily conflagration to deal with.

Statistics gathered by the United States Government, Department of Commerce and Labor, show an *average annual per capita loss in six European countries of 33 cents, and that the average annual number of fires in European cities is eight for each 10,000 of population; while in this country the average annual per capita loss is over \$3.00 and the annual number of fires for each 10,000 of population in American cities averages over 40.*

Glasgow had a fire loss in 1908 of \$325,000, and seldom does the loss reach half a million. Boston, with a less population, has a fire loss of over \$2,000,000.

*Berlin, with a population of 3,000,000 has an annual fire loss of less than \$175,000. Its fire department costs a little over \$300,000. Chicago's fire loss is \$5,000,000 and its fire department costs over \$3,000,000, although its population is only about two-thirds of Berlin.*

*New York City spends \$10,000,000 on its fire department; not including \$3,000,000 more on its high pressure services; yet its fire loss runs up to \$10,000,000.*

*Statistics similar to these might be multiplied a hundred-fold, but the above are sufficient to emphasize two important facts:*

*FIRST: The fire waste in this country is certainly of such proportions as to merit earnest consideration.*

*SECOND: The comparison with European fire losses clearly shows that the enormous figures in this country are unnecessary, and also goes far to explain why the insurance rates in this country are so many times the rates abroad.*

*It is claimed by those best fitted to form an accurate opinion that more than fifty percent of our fires are due to what may be properly classed as "easily preventable causes"; in other words, are attributable to carelessness.*

*Sixty thousand people are killed each year in this country by accidents, and some five or six times that number are injured. Mr. James O. Fagan, who has shown such remarkable insight into railroad problems, especially in connection with accidents, says: --*

*"The public and the management of the railroads could immediately cut the casualty loss from this and similar causes in half by getting after every specific accident, and by treating it in a common sense and practical manner."*

*The Boston Herald, in an editorial on the **Collinwood School holocaust** says: --*

*"A spasm of horrified emotions has passed over the country as a consequence of the deaths of a crowd of children in the fire which destroyed the Collinwood School at Cleveland. The horror is natural. It is a credit to the country. But the fire and its results were the natural effects of a succession of causes which discredit the country because they are characteristic of the country. The horror and sympathy are human; they are common to all civilized communities; the recklessness which caused the unspeakable disaster is American. It has no counterpart elsewhere.*

*The city authorities, the school authorities, all were negligent. Behind their negligence stands the great gaping negligence of the public, the same negligence that causes annually in the United States more accidental deaths and injuries than three great wars.*

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*There is terrific loss of life and limb in this country from preventable causes. No other land shows anything like it, or anything approaching it. This is not because of the vastness of our population, but because of its carelessness. We are the most careless people on earth. We permit a looseness of conditions, a recklessness of method, or a method of recklessness which would not be tolerated in Great Britain or Germany or France. This laxity runs on our railroads, pervades our coal mines, meanders in our mills, asserts itself in the slovenliness of our cities and our vacant lots, and is traced directly to our homes along the icy sidewalks to our front doors and the doors of our churches and public institutions. The average American cares no more about the conditions outside the walls of his home than he cares about the conditions on the most distant planet. We are indifferent and unashamed. The spasms of public horror are soon over and forgotten. They accomplish nothing."*

*With such a condition confronting us, is there not a work before this association whose objects are "to promote the science and improve the methods of fire protection and fire prevention", and is not this work of sufficient magnitude and importance to command the best effort of every individual member?*

*I believe we should, as an association, very carefully consider whether there are not some lines along which we may effectually work to lessen this appalling waste and do something to conserve our created resources. Surely this is as important as our efforts to conserve our natural resources. **We have already done good and valuable work in formulating standards for good construction, and safeguards for necessary hazards; but this alone is not enough.** We must in some way secure the adoption and use of these standards and safeguards.*

*I am reminded of the story told of an attendant in an insane asylum, who gave the following as his test of sanity of those committed to his charge:*

*"I open the water cock so the water runs on the basement floor, then I tells the patient to mop up the water, those what aint idjits shuts off the water first."*

*Now, we have provided the best of tools. The mop handle has been tested by strain of so many pounds. The thickness of the iron has been prescribed, as well as the pitch of the thread on the screw of the holding clamp, and the mop itself is made up of long fibre with a certain number of threads of standard twist and diameter. The pail is made of the proper guage of [gauge] steel and the ears for the pail are riveted and not soldered, and both are perhaps even labeled. **BUT HOW ABOUT THE FAUCET?** There is no question but what a good and proper mop and pail are essential, but remember that those "what ain't idjits shuts off the water first."*

*Now, if carelessness causes fifty per cent of our fires, can we not attack this carelessness and get the faucet shut half way or a part of it? If the American people are careless, they also have a way of righting wrongs when you once get them waked up. It has seemed to me if we could get the public thoroughly impressed with the facts, that some good results would surely follow; **and with this end in view your executive committee last summer made an appropriation to be spent in a "publicity campaign" under the direction of your President who had been ably assisted by our Assistant Secretary, Mr. Wentworth.** Members of our association were secured to act as correspondents in about seventy cities scattered all over the country and they have been furnished with bulletins, treating of various common cause of fire, for publication in daily papers.*

*Almost all of these correspondents took hold of the work enthusiastically and with great efficiency, many of them covering other cities than their own where no one had been selected and also supplementing the bulletin we sent out with additional pertinent matter. The success of this work has been largely due to those selected as correspondents, and they may be sure that their efforts were heartily appreciated by those having the direction of this matter and the thanks of this association are surely due to them.*

*As we expected, the press has been ready to "lend a hand" to any effort that seemed for the benefit of the readers, and these bulletins have been published in nearly one hundred papers. As far as we can judge it has made up a total of between six and seven hundred columns of newspaper matter, having been accompanied, in many cases, by editorial comment of a very pertinent character.*

*I am sure if this work can be energetically carried on for awhile we shall succeed in interesting the editors of our daily papers so that they will, of their own accord, continue it as from time to time they may have occasion to comment on the loss of life and property by fire. That this opinion is not without foundation is certainly shown by the fact that nearly every one of our popular magazines has had one or more articles on our fire loss during the past six months.*

*Surely the leaders of our public thought are beginning to realize that insurance is a tax the size of which is determined by the insured according to the appropriations he chooses to make to our annual ash heap. The power and influence which could be exerted by the fifteen hundred members of this association, to say nothing of the thousands of others connected with our active membership associations, can hardly be estimated.*

*The sum total of a little time, a little thought, and a little effort which, without in any way taxing the individual, might be given by each would cause an irresistible wave of intelligent carefulness to spread from the Atlantic to the Pacific, which in time must produce marked results. I am a great believer in this "campaign of education", and I urgently recommend to the incoming executives that the very moderate beginnings we have made during the past year be continued and developed as far as circumstances will permit.*

*I firmly believe if we can succeed in bringing these matters continually before the minds of the public that the time will come when our legislatures will not “refer to the next general court” the regulations of the manufacture and sale of the parlor match with its annual sacrifice of six hundred lives and millions of property; when we shall not have to wait for an Iroquois Theater to secure proper laws for safe-guarding the people in places of assembly; when municipalities will forbid the storage of explosives and highly inflammable materials in buildings used as dwelling without such an incentive as Lenox, Massachusetts; when vertical openings in our large area stores will be decently safeguarded instead of being surrounded with highly inflammable goods, and this before some awful catastrophe forces the matter on our attention; when good building laws will be everywhere adopted and thoroly [thoroughly] and impartially enforced; **when shingled roofs, one of the greatest conflagration breeders, will become a thing of the past;** when at least as much time will be given in our public schools to instructing children in regard to the danger to life and property due to carelessness with fire, as is now given to teaching them about the complementary colors and dominant harmony; when effectual fire marshal offices will be established in every state for the purposes of reducing our criminal fire loss, patterned somewhat on the lines laid down by the State of Ohio, to whose efficient representative this meeting will later have the pleasure of listening and to whom great credit must be given for his efforts to educate the people of Ohio, both through frequent bulletins in the daily papers and thru very instructive and valuable text books on the chemistry of fires, which are used in the public schools of his state; and, when finally the people of this nation shall fully comprehend the enormous drain on our resources caused by this utterly unproductive fire waste, so that self interest shall change our careless and reckless methods to the more conservative and saner methods and practices of European nations.*

*And now, Gentlemen, I desire to impress on your minds the fact that all these things can be much more quickly and effectively brought about by a quiet and persistent “campaign of education” than in any other way.*

*Horrible examples have an effect for a very short time. The Boston Herald is right when it says, **“The spasms of public horror are soon over and forgotten; they accomplish nothing.”** If we wish results that will be lasting we must so educate the public that our theme becomes their everyday thought and speech.*

*I thank you, Gentlemen, for your kind attention. (Applause.)”*

**Source:** *Proceedings of the National Fire Protection Association*

The comparisons between fires losses and fire department costs between European countries and the United States is most interesting, as is the statistic on the number of fire fatalities which occurred in the United States. The number of fire fatalities occurring in the United States in the early 1900's is about the same as today, but it is important to note the difference in the population in the early 1900's and today. On a per capita basis, we are much safer from fire today than in the early 1900's.

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