

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 98: 1915 (THE NFPA PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS)

By Richard Schulte

The nineteenth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was held in New York City in May 1915. As was the custom, the President of the Association addressed the meeting after the calling of the membership roll. The following is the transcript of the President's address:

"PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS.

President, Robert D. Kohn of New York.

As it is my privilege to open the proceedings of this, the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the National Fire Protection Association, so it is my duty under the circumstances to review the formidable program of work which this Association adopted at the last annual meeting. To complete my task I am also to report in general terms on the somewhat less formidable accomplishments of the same period. The purpose of our Association is defined in our Articles of Association as follows: "To promote the science and improve the methods of fire protection and prevention; to obtain and circulate information on these subjects and to secure the co-operation of its members in establishing proper safeguards against loss of life and property by fire." What has been accomplished by our energetic committees in this direction will be brought to your attention in detail by these committees during the sessions of this Association of the next three days. No one who hears these reports or reads this mass of technical material will fail to realize the devoted service which has been rendered our cause during the year. The members who have thus given of their time and their knowledge have not worked toward a selfish end. In the best sense they have been in the service of our country, for they have helped to build up the solid foundation on which our country's legislation to reduce the fire hazard must in the future be based if it is to be based on expert, not on amateur opinion. They have served their country as the citizens of a democracy can best serve it--by offering the best of themselves for the good of all. They offer it and trust to convincing others through the wisdom inherent in the offerings, not through force. In this sense, we, the workers in this effort toward the protection of life and property are soldiers enlisted in a fight against an enemy, fire. Let us hope that more and more the technically qualified citizens of this country may join in this and other ways to further by constructive means the ends of right and wisdom, and that we may be spared from any desire to attain just ends by means of violence and destruction.

In the last annual report of your President reference was made to the recognition already accorded the standards of this Association by various state and municipal authorities. It seemed evident that we could best advance our cause only through legislation wisely guided. Members were urged to use their best efforts to bring our carefully studied standards to the attention of their local and state governments. It was declared to be the privilege and duty of a member of this Association to insist on the acceptance of these results of expert knowledge, and the hope was expressed that with every succeeding year the practical results attained by such propaganda would grow in even greater proportions.

In my opinion it may be fairly claimed that the accomplishments of the year have fulfilled all that might properly have been demanded. They did not, to be sure, equal our expectation; but it was proper that our program should far outbid the possibilities of accomplishment in order that at least some fair measure of success might attend our work.

I can recite but a few of the achievements of our officers. Through the activities of our most enthusiastic Secretary, Mr. Franklin Wentworth, as you will hear from his report, we have furthered in various states a law which would place the responsibility for damage by fire to neighboring property upon the owner of the premises in which any fire originates as the result of his negligence. In various communities our standards of fire protection and our "small-towns" building codes have found favor and in part or in their entirety have been adopted into the law.

As an evidence I believe of the value of our propaganda work, and surely an evidence of its effectiveness, we may cite the opposition that has arisen in certain quarters against the work done by this organization. This is surely a sign of healthy activity. Among these protesting groups there is to be noted a rather formidable group of citizens interested in the sale of wood. Some of the journals interested in forestry products have attacked the propaganda work of the National Fire Protection Association, and in a few cases even misrepresented it. These particular representatives (?) of the lumber interests seem to fear that the work of this Association may seriously affect their sales. That the fight being made is distinctly a selfish, narrow-minded one cannot be doubted. Your President has every reason to know from conferences with the best elements of those interested in forestry products that the really intelligent, broad-minded lumbermen know that no injustice will in the long run be done to the lumber interests as a result of an intelligent policy of fire protection. Through the efforts of this latter group of producers I was given an opportunity to speak before the Forest Products Convention held in Chicago in the month of January. In a brief address an attempt was there made to outline the policy of the National Fire Protection Association toward every particular "interest" which may come in conflict with its propaganda. In accordance with that policy I urged upon the lumber men to undertake a thorough scientific investigation of the proper use of lumber in modern buildings. The futility of any "dog in the manger" policy was urged upon them--a policy which insists that wood should not be legislated against at all and that its use shall be permitted under every and any circumstance in any location. The Convention was urged to find out where it would be safe to use wood and then when that was scientifically established insist on the right to so use it. When safe uses of their material had thus been established, then and then only would they have the right to go before legislators and plead that unscientific legislation against the use of wood be stopped--that this material has legitimate and safe uses, and that only such uses should be encouraged. Such a policy it was pointed out could only be effective how-

ever, if the lumber interests would support legislation which prohibits the unscientific and dangerous uses of wood. In the name of this Association an attempt was then made to indicate the right and the wrong way to "boom" any material. In a democracy the only man who has the right to advise his fellow citizen is the one who speaks with knowledge, and not he who urges a selfish interest in some particular cause.

It is proper to note that this same attitude of our Association has on this, as on a number of other occasions, been outlined before technical bodies connected with our Association or allied in their interests, and has met with general approval. A number of representatives of the lumber interests at the Chicago meeting cordially endorsed these views.

It is fair to ourselves to take stock of the evidence of growing official interest in the work of the National Fire Protection Association. The officers of your Association have been able to co-operate for the first time during this year to a limited extent with certain departments of the government in the establishment of standards of safe construction. This co-operation will in my opinion be much advanced if we can present our standards in graphic form. A plan to this effect has the general endorsement of your Executive Committee. We are convinced that the publication of diagrams illustrative of forms of construction that reduce the hazard from fire to life and property will encourage their adoption after due trial as safety standards by the national and state governments. They would then be distributed throughout the country to any one interested. Citizens in far-away places completely out of touch with fire prevention experts would then be advised most easily as to the proper construction of chimneys, the proper enclosures of elevator shafts; the safe construction of staircases and other exits; of roofs, of cellars, of hatchways, etc. We have during the past year received many assurances from different government departments that such a series of standard sheets would be of invaluable assistance. Their publication would be a great step forward in the cause of conservation.

This address finally is not only an introduction to the Nineteenth Annual Convention of the National Fire Protection Association, but it is in a way the valedictory of your President. I will have completed within the next two days my second term of office. It is only just that I should now tell you of my great respect for the earnest work you are doing, and for the admirable cause for which this Association is working. This has become more and more evident during my term of office, as I realized your efforts. While I have a sense of having been inadequate to the task which you assigned to me, I shall always feel proud indeed to have been so honored. I congratulate this Association on the good it has done in the past. I congratulate it still more on what it plans to do for the common good in the future.

Vice President Wiederhold: I think the Association owes a debt of supreme gratitude to President Kohn for the unselfish and generous manner in which he has devoted time and labor to our work. With absolutely no thought of ulterior purpose or benefit, he has always responded to every demand that has been made upon him.

You have heard his address just delivered; what is your pleasure?

Mr. Humphrey: In moving the acceptance of this admirable address I would like to say a word of appreciation of the work of President Kohn in fire protection and fire prevention. I think he has struck the keynote of his own character when he says that our work has been an unselfish and devoted work. I have followed his career for many years a member, and I think we were very fortunate in his selection as our president. As a leading member of the American Institute of Architects Mr. Kohn has done more than any one else to interest the architects and building constructors in the questions of fire protection and fire prevention, and I am continually hearing expressions of appreciation of the admirable work he has done. It is through the devotion of such exception men that our cause progresses. Our influence is beginning to count. The evidence is unmistakable. We cannot help but feel impressed with the work that has been done in New York City since the establishment of the Bureau of Fire Prevention. Traveling from Philadelphia to New York we see many evidences of the new work of fire protection. In factories passed by the train there is a good deal of fresh red paint, emphasizing new fire doors, fire windows and fire escapes. If we will stop a moment to consider how really recent all such work is we will appreciate the progress we have made. As Rome was not built in a day, so our great a task of fire prevention and fire protection cannot be accomplished in a day; but we are making admirable progress and to this progress our President has made a great contribution. I think we should express our appreciation as an Association for the work that Mr. Kohn has done for our cause both as member and as President, and I move you that we do so. (Applause.)

(The motion was enthusiastically adopted.)

President Kohn: I thank you.

While the President's address provides little in the way of technical information or statistics, this address is still of interest because Robert Kohn was a member of the American Institute of Architects (AIA). Clearly, the AIA had a significant influence in the development of the National Fire Protection Association.

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