

### **FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 164: 1921 (EXCERPTS OF THE PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS)**

By Richard Schulte

1921 was a special year for the National Fire Protection Association-the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Association in 1896. To celebrate its silver anniversary, the NFPA chose to meet on the West Coast, the City of San Francisco, which was also marking an anniversary-the fifteenth anniversary of the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire.

With these two occasions as the backdrop for the meeting, the President's Address at the Annual Meeting in 1921 were of special significance to the Association. The following are a few excerpts from that Address by Wilbur E. Mallalieu, President of the Association:

*"I doubt if any organization ever had a president who could resist the temptation presented by the occasion of a twenty-fifth anniversary to review the quarter-century of its progress. This president certainly cannot, and for many reasons he is glad that the first really impressive anniversary of our Association should be celebrated in the romantic, picturesque and yet tremendously vital City of San Francisco. Our "silver" jubilee at the "Golden" Gate: there is artistic harmony in that!"*

*". . . The pleasure of clasping the hands and looking into the faces of our members on the Pacific Coast who have never made the long journey to our Atlantic Coast meetings is very real; but there is more in our coming than that. Our coming emphasizes two major facts: one that the Pacific Coast is one of our most important fields of interest and activity; the other that the National Fire Protection Association is not a local or a sectional body. . ."*

*"We must admit that the older nations of the world regard us in North America with curious eyes. They cannot understand exactly how we do it. They have not exactly made up their minds whether the United States and Canada are peopled principally by incendiaries or if we are a childish people who love to play with matches. They cannot understand why when they are so ready to buy and consume our wheat and corn and cotton we should be maintaining a continuous conflagration of those products."*

*“The average citizen never thinks of FIRE at all, but merely thinks of FIRES. He remembers having seen a fire on the way to his office yesterday morning and he reads of another fire in this afternoon's paper; but these and similar incidents seem to be individual and unconnected, things that cannot be anticipated and need not be remembered for long.”*

*“Some twenty-five years ago the third word of our title began to suggest itself to a few far-sighted men. These men asked of themselves the question, “Is this tremendous loss by fire inevitable?” There could be but one answer to that question; the answer that theoretically, at least, this waste was preventable. If it were the result of unsafe conditions, human ingenuity and foresight might substitute conditions of safety. In other words, **the fire menace might be met by fire protection.**”*

*“Thus, from present indications, the 1920 fire waste will run in excess of \$500,000,000. There has been no single conflagration, and yet out of the accumulated carelessness has grown a fire waste that is almost equal to that of 1906, the year of the San Francisco Fire, and greater than any other year's total in our history.”*

*“. . . The National Fire Protection Association has devoted itself to a solution of this problem; but the end is still far distant. . .”*

*“. . . But we have today reliable evidence that the foundation has been laid for a more sane and careful North America and I am firm in the belief that the unhappy waste which has marked this continent for so many years will soon be reasonably abated and that the millions annually thus saved will express themselves in more substantial and beautiful mills, factories, workshops and homes and a happier and more contented people.”*

Of the previous addresses given by the Presidents of the National Fire Protection Association at the Annual Meetings, perhaps Mr. Mallalieu's address at this special Meeting of the Association was the most eloquent of all. One line in the address, in particular, stands out:

***“In other words, the fire menace might be met by fire protection.”***

This statement is an acknowledgment that fire prevention alone is insufficient to meet the threat of fire. Regardless of the care taken, the hazard of fire cannot be addressed solely by fire prevention. The world was filled with hazards and accidental fires were simply a part of the world as it existed in the 1920's.

In the more than 90 years which have intervened between the NFPA Meeting held in San Francisco and today much has changed. Today, the modern world would be almost unrecognizable to those who lived during the 1920's. Many of the fire hazards of old have been eliminated, but new fire hazards have been created.

In the 15 years following the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, the hazard of conflagrations which destroyed large swaths of cities was eliminated through improvements in fire department equipment and municipal water supplies. While city-wide conflagrations were eliminated, the hazard of fires which destroyed multiple buildings at one time remained and both the floor area and height of new buildings being constructed was increasing. So while the fire hazard challenges of the early part of the 1900's were overcome, these challenges were simply replaced with new ones.

In the years which have followed 1921, particularly the last 40 years, the level of building fire safety both mandated by building codes and provided by building owners has increased substantially. While the hazard of fire is still with us, the number of fires which occur in the United States is down substantially (as measured on a per capita basis). As would be expected with the number of fires being substantially reduced, the number of fire fatalities and injuries caused by fire has also been reduced substantially.

While we are not there yet, some day the number of fatal fires occurring in the United States will be limited to just a handful. In fact, in many occupancies, the goal of practically eliminating fatal fires has already been attained. Only in one occupancy, and in one type of building, do fire fatalities still occur in large numbers-residential occupancies not protected by a sprinkler system.

Given the fire data for the United States from recent years, we should be encouraged that the vision that the hazard of fire will eventually be all but vanquished in the United States will someday be realized in the not too distant future.

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Richard C. Schulte

**Source:** "*Proceedings of the Twenty-fifth Annual [NFPA] Meeting*", San Francisco, California, 1921.