

FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 181: 1922 (CAPT. CONWAY)

By Richard Schulte

One of the early leaders in the development of effective fire prevention programs was Captain J. J. Conway. The following is the transcript of Captain's Conway's presentation at the twenty-sixth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association held in 1922:

The President: The next speaker needs no special introduction; Captain J. J. Conway, superintendent of the Cincinnati Salvage Corps.

*[Captain Conway:] I fear the time allotted to the speakers on this big question will not allow me to approach the subject at all. I shall only try and hit the high places as fast as I can. The success of fire prevention work is really wonderful; great achievements have actually been made. **The fact that the fire loss is reported a little bit heavier than in previous years does not necessarily indicate that the fire waste has increased.** The method of securing the figures of fire losses has been improved and more complete statistics are being kept than were kept in the past. We have been talking too much about results, and we have not been talking enough about causes; we have not been facing facts frankly. If I am abruptly frank in what I say here today, I want you to remember that it is the cause that I am trying to promote; the interests of our Association and the interests of the public at large that I have at heart. No doctor in the world ever cured anybody or got anybody to take any interest in his health by telling him how many people were in the graveyard. (Applause and laughter.) It is his duty to diagnose his cases, to find out what is the matter with his patients, and to prescribe the remedy. That is what we are trying to do today. First of all, what are the many contributing causes? What anchors have we got dragging to the ship of fire prevention and retarding our progress? Those are the things we want to look after and raise before we strike a rock. Are there certain interests that are promoting fire waste? Are salesmen doing what they should do in a time of depression? Are they forcing stocks and credit on the people; forcing them to buy goods on credit that they know they cannot sell, and then in a short while enforcing payment for those goods? The merchant finds himself with his shelves filled with frozen assets that he cannot dispose of. He sees the sheriff coming in one door with a foreclosure that means 20, 30, 40 or 50 cents on the dollar. He sees a fire insurance policy on the other side, the fire of which will melt those frozen assets into legal tender and pay 100 cents on the dollar. Who is to blame? The man who was tempted or the man who tempted him? We have got to get down to business propositions. Suppose that every furnace man should do his duty to*

the public as he should do it, and when installing heating devices he should send out a circular of instructions on the control and management of that device. Let me draw a few examples for you. I could go out here on the beach, take a bath, enjoy it and it would do me good, but I haven't any idea of jumping into the middle of the ocean. Everything is good up to a certain point, and beyond that it is destructive. Is there anything in the world that is more necessary to our comfort, our happiness and our peace than water and fire? Is there anything more destructive when beyond control? So it is with every device on the market, it has its limits of safety and it has its way of control, but what is being done to educate the public in the use of the devices involving fire hazards? The manufacturers and salesmen say that people are ignorant; they are ignorant because they have not had the proper teachers; they have neglected their work; they are not doing the service they are getting paid for nor earning the profits that they are extracting. If the electric man, in installing an electric system, would put a card on the fuse box telling what a fuse is and what should be done with it and the danger if those fuses are bridged over, how many people would bridge them over? They do not know any better; they bridge them over because they who put them in do not tell them how to control such devices, the devices they are selling to the public. The way to get fire prevention is to organize every business that is selling the public anything that will cause trouble unless properly controlled, and then get the manufacturers to agree to send out with such devices notices and instructions as to the proper control of such things. When we do that, we will then begin to get somewhere with fire prevention.

We are all more or less interested in the fire insurance business; we are interested in its success; not because we want the companies to profit but because we want them to remain solvent and be able to pay losses. Get this one point indelibly in your mind and then stamp it in the mind of the public; that while it is an old saying that insurance companies are merely collectors and distributors of the fire loss fund it is the greatest truth that was ever spoken. That being admitted, who are they collecting and distributing it for? For the insuring public; the insuring public have control and maintenance of the property and the control and maintenance of the amount to be collected and distributed, and all money expended for fire departments, inspection bureaus, waterworks and other such good things are almost futile and foolish as long as that one fundamental principle is lost sight of. It is just as hopeless to attempt to save the property of any man who neglects his own duty to that property as it would be to go out and pick up a drunkard, an incompetent and incapable man, and try to raise him to the elevation of a skilled mechanic. It cannot be done.

It rests with the public; and it rests with you to properly inform them. As long as the present system of compensating those who are soliciting and procuring fire insurance exists, I do not know how big an anchor we shall have to drag. I do not attempt to suggest the remedy, but so long as the solicitor, so long as the local agent and so long as the broker can benefit by the selling of insurance without taking into consideration the underwriting profit or the service that he is to give to the public, we

shall drag a pretty heavy anchor in fire prevention. But if the time ever comes when his compensation rests largely on the profits of the business that he brings in, that anchor will be raised and the fire waste will drop. Now I say to the men who are selling commodities that are dangerous without instruction; and I say to the insurance agent who is not giving service (and I want to say now that there are thousands of them in the the United States who are strictly honest and giving service) I want to say to those men, when they are selling commodities and not giving service, that the end of a hog is the slaughter house, and as they fatten on the profits of this kind of business they are heading straight for the killing pen! There is public agitation against insurance companies it is true, but it is aimed at the wrong target. Insurance companies have injured nobody; it is the solicitor who is the offender, the man who comes in contact with the public, the man who has charge of selecting the business, the man who should take into consideration the condition of one and the circumstances of the other before accepting the business and sending it to his company; if he was dependent on the underwriting profits of the insurance business conditions would be different. Yesterday I heard it said on the floor here that certain sprinkler equipments did not work because they were connected to a four-inch main. Who fooled the public there? Who connected them, in the first place, to a main that would not feed them?

Did that man give the service he ought to? Did the long reports on those risks that went to the companies indicate the true condition of the risk? No, in spite of all the ink and paper the examiner did not know whether it was a good or a bad risk. (Applause.) Say it plain, so the fellow at the daily report desk will know whether he wants to accept or reject a risk. Cut down the ink; use plain language. The sprinkler men— I am ashamed of them. They never attempted to sell protection in their lives, and they have got the best protection there is. Their whole aim is to endeavor to show the public how much they can save in insurance rates by putting in automatic sprinklers. Change your tactics, sprinkler men! Know your own article and sell your own article and sell it for protection; don't connect it up where you know that the protection you are charging for will not be given. Every time a sprinkler equipment fails it is a black eye to your business; you are hogging it just the same as the rest of them are! (Applause and laughter.)

Gentlemen, I stayed off the platform down here on the floor so I would have ample access to places to get out! (Laughter.) I realize that talking of the past and what has happened is not going to get me anywhere; we must be studying exactly what is causing the trouble and applying remedies to that cause. We have not been honest, we have not been honest with the public and the public has been led in ignorance because we have not imparted the proper information. If we will go forth in this work— did you ever contrast this work with the enemy that we are working against? Has fire prevention ever been "sold" to you right before you tried to sell it to the public? What is the enemy doing? The result of his performance is the charred remains of homes, the smouldering remains of cities, the cry of the widow and the

orphan, distress, destruction and sorrow; while the work that you are doing, on the other hand, is the noblest work that can be done—the conservation of life and property, the preservation of our resources to bring back happiness and comfort to all. That, of itself, should stimulate you to the work that you are doing. But first of all, get busy, find the cause and apply the remedy and be honest with yourself and honest with the people you are dealing with. When the time comes that we are willing to look facts straight in the face; then fire prevention will go forward, and must go forward, and with the work of this and kindred organizations that have been covering our flanks, we will land the ship of fire prevention safe and sane at the docks, no matter what anchors we have to drag. (Applause)

Mr. Ira G. Hoagland (National Automatic Sprinkler Association): I wish to say that what Captain Conway said about the sprinkler industry is exactly correct. (Applause and laughter.)

Mr. F. B. Quackenboss (Nashville): I am not on the program to tell the Association why fire prevention efforts do not produce more results, but I think I can tell it in less than ten minutes and probably as well as any speaker that has appeared or is going to appear. The real reason is that all of us do not work as hard for fire prevention as Captain Conway. If we all worked as he does, in the same manner and as hard, I doubt if there would be much use for the N. F. P. A., there wouldn't be anything for it to do.

While Capt. Conway's address is not particularly memorable, the address serves to highlight a few of the issues of particular interest in 1922.

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