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FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 156: 1919 (ALVAH SMALL/THE FUTURE OF THE AEROPLANE)

By Richard Schulte

The twenty-third Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association was held in Ottawa, Ontario in Canada. This meeting opened with a welcoming address by the mayor of Ottawa, Mayor Harold Fisher. Following Mayor Fisher's welcome, Alvah Small, then the vice-president of Underwriters' Laboratories, rose to respond and to thank Mayor Fisher for his kind welcome to Ottawa. The following is part of Alvah Small's response where he predicts that someday air transportation will replace rail transportation and that this will have a significant impact on the manufacturing infrastructure of the United States:

> "*Mr. A. R. Small (Vice-President Underwriters' Laboratories): . . . .Economically it is not wise nor profitable that we should build for ages; it is to be expected that in any newly settled country the facilities provided for man's occupation, for his residence, shall be of a temporary character, and it is not wise from an investment point of view that our buildings shall be designed for permanency and for the settled occupancy that is expected of premises in the continental countries. We are also a progressive people, both Canadians and Americans. I recall an interesting conversation with a friend last fall, when we were discussing the proper method of business accounting and figuring depreciation on a newly built factory of his. He was very proud of the fact that a two and a half per cent. annual write-off for depreciation was a very proper charge in view of the excellent and modern character of his factory. The plant was built of reinforced concrete, equipped with wired-glass windows, automatic sprinklers and all facilities for the conduct of his business. I stated my thought that a ten per cent. write-off for depreciation would be none too great. After due course, the conversation proceeded along other lines. He contested my view, but finally we forecast a possible future in aviation under which he proceeded to advance his thought that within ten years from today all freight delivered at his factory would arrive by airships. Immediately I asked him what then became of his modern factory, which was planned for railroad delivery, and if his roof were equipped and were the balance of his premises designed so that his goods could be delivered and taken away by aeroplane? Following this thought, he admitted that possibly a ten per cent. write-off for depreciation of his existing plant would be none too great. We are progressive in the United States; you are progressive in Canada, and we cannot now plan premises or buildings to last forever. . . .*"

Although Mr. Small's prediction that air transportation would overtake transportation by rail in perhaps as little as ten years was off the mark, the general prediction that aviation would someday supercede railroads as a primary means of both industrial and public transportation did indeed eventually come true.

Perhaps of more importance, however, was Mr. Small's analysis of the economics of building construction and, hence, building fire protection. The design and construction of buildings is governed by the laws of economics and, so to is the extent of the building owner's investment in building fire protection. In other words, economics can and should play a large part in deciding the extent of investments in building fire protection. The importance of economics (cost/benefit) in making building fire protection decisions is an important point to grasp.

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Source: "*Proceedings of the Twenty-third Annual* [NFPA] *Meeting*", Ottawa, Canada, 1919.