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FIRE PROTECTION HISTORY-PART 92: 1914 (SUB-STANDARD SPRINKLER EQUIPMENT)

By Richard Schulte

One of the final topics of discussion at the eighteenth Annual Meeting of the National Fire Protection Association meeting was on a sprinkler system design issue. This discussion was initiated by Mr. Forster, the chairman of the Committee on Safety to Life. The following is a transcript of this discussion:

"*The Chair: Is there any other item of new business?*

Mr. Forster: There has been for many years in the minds of quite a few members of the N.F.P.A. a very decided feeling that the so called sub-standard sprinkler equipment was entitled to consideration. The origin of the sprinkler system undoubtedly goes back to the good old days in New England, when the textile mill presented a particular problem in fire protection, and when there was a necessity of a public source of water supply which would take care of the openings of a considerable number of sprinkler heads. Our own records, than which there are no better fire records in the world, indicate that 81 per cent of all our fires have been extinguished or held in check by ten sprinkler heads, and for that reason many of us have felt that our standards with reference to public water supplies and sometimes even other water supplies, were altogether too rigorous for many conditions. The possibilities of effecting economies in the present cost of the sprinkler system lie chiefly in a reduction in the water supply requirements. And while I do not stand before you as a preacher of the sub-standard gospel, I do feel frequently that something could be done along this line without jeopardizing the cause for which we all stand, but, on the other hand, greatly increasing our possibility of usefulness. I enjoyed the preaching of the gospel of sprinkler protection applied to the greatest "fire problem" city in the world and endorsed so vigorously yesterday in the persons of Mr. Adamson and Mr. Hammitt. Now, gentlemen, I think I am speaking truthfully when I say that a reasonable number of the men who are assembled here feel that this question of a sub-standard sprinkler system is entitled to recognition, and I have in mind particularly the possibility of our Committee on Automatic Sprinklers bringing into the Association at our next annual meeting a report indicating the possibility of the one-way sprinkler system connected to city mains only where there are reasonably sized mains and reasonable pressure and reasonably high buildings; and also the possibility of in some degree limiting the size of the supply pipe to the gross area in which fire is likely to take place. That, Mr. Chairman, is the point I desire to bring before the meeting, and I shall not be surprised if my life is no longer safe as a result of my temerity.

Mr. Sullivan: I would dislike very much to see anything go into our rules that would recognize a sub-standard sprinkler equipment. I follow the practice myself of seeing whether or not installations of what we might call sub-standard equipment can be given reasonable credit; but I would be very much opposed to recognizing it in our rules. I think it is a matter that should be left to the underwriters having jurisdiction."

Mr. Evans: May I make an ominous remark with respect to substandard or B-standard sprinkler equipments? I was talking recently with John R. Freeman, who has expressed great interest of late in the sprinkling of office buildings in cities, and structures of that general class, and he has emphasized the thought that something below the rigid standard for mill protection might be well worth while in structures of that sort, and could be installed if adequate protection was secured. That feeling seems to be growing with respect to definite classes of structures. With respect to a word that has been employed here to-day in the report on " Fire-resistive Construction," I know that was used in the London Conference in 1903, and last fall in Philadelphia it was brought up in the shape of a resolution, but I would like to suggest that the word " resistant " is somewhat better for that purpose, as it makes a better definition, and is one that would possibly travel down the line somewhat easier.

This excerpt is of interest for a number of reasons. First, the discussion reflects a concern about the cost of installing sprinkler protection and the need to reduce installation costs in order to increase the number of buildings where installing sprinkler protection is an economically viable alternative. Second, the discussion specifically mentions the installation of sprinkler protection in office buildings.

This discussion in 1914 sounds very similar to the discussions about sprinkler system installation costs that occurred in the late 1960's and early 1970's when the issue of how to make sprinkler installations in high rise office and residential buildings feasible was being considered.

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