

Triangle Firefighting

(based on the pipenozzle.com essay)

by Barry Roberts Greer

Chief Croker resigns

On May 1, 1911, Edward F. Croker, who had been chief of the Fire Department of New York since 1899, resigned five weeks after the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire at 23 Washington Place in lower Manhattan.

Croker was not forced out. He was too tough politically to be used as a scapegoat for the Triangle fire deaths---the real culprits, the Triangle factory owners, would be indicted for manslaughter---and the FDNY companies at the fire acted aggressively and quickly knocked down the fire. Croker was too touch physically to let the Triangle Fire stop him. As a firefighter and fire officer, Croker had gone through a roof into a basement and survived. He'd been knocked out by a backdraft at a multiple alarm worker. And Chief Croker had seen mass casualty fires before; he was chief when the Slocum burned to the water line on the East River with a loss of over 1000 lives on June 15, 1904, most of them women and children on a church outing. Croker wrote in 1911 that he resigned after 27 years with FDNY to devote the rest of his life "to preventing, instead of fighting fires."

Croker also wrote in that same article for *The World's Work*, a Harvard journal with New Jersey governor Woodrow Wilson on the October 1911 cover, that since he joined FDNY as a basic firefighter, "a private" in his words, in 1884, the department had grown from 886 to 4500 hundred men and 1600 horses. The rigs in 1884, according to Croker, were "antiquated," but had over the years gotten better so that he could say that "the equipment is the most scientific and complete in the world." It needed to be. New York City had grown in the first decade of the 20th Century---after the five counties became unified as the five boroughs in one city--by nearly 39 percent in population to 4,800,000 due to mass immigration by those who'd rather risk life in the Manhattan tinderbox than certain death by fire in Russian or Polish pogroms.

Yes, if you now respond with an enclosed cab Seagrave, it's easy to smile when reading what Croker said about horse-drawn, steam-powered pumpers, and to think that was then, this is now. Things have changed a lot in that last 100 years.

Not really.

Triangle fireground

FDNY Engine 72 is now quartered in the Bronx, but on March 25, 1911, Engine 72, the horse-drawn steam pumper and its tender responded from 22 East 12th Street and reached 23 Washington Place one block east of Washington Park in a minute and a half after Box 289 was pulled at 4:45 pm, five minutes, according to the NY Times, after the fire started. The 4:46:30 arrival time is in the court record from October 1911, and the speed of response is confirmed by

Damon Campagna, the director of the New York City Fire Museum, who said 72 certainly could and did respond that quickly, both pumper and tender. In fact, Campagna said, fire companies ran hitching drills twice a day each day of the week but Sunday. In 1886, the FDNY record for hitching a team was 3.25 seconds with the chauffeur in the driver's seat. The slowest time was 11.25 seconds with a department average of 6.7 seconds. Try that with a modern rig. Get out the door in 6.7 seconds from time of alarm. It isn't done any more.

Nor were they slow with setup at the scene. A youtube.com video shows amateurs operating a Eureka steam pumper and getting a 2 ½ line charged in two and a half minutes, and they were drafting from a tank. Engine 72 arrived at Washington Place and connected to a high pressure hydrant. Yes, they had high pressure mains then. They had standpipes. And the steamers had evolved technologically near the end of the horse-drawn era so they could generate enough pressure to charge a ten story standpipe or shoot a stream ten stories high. The first Battalion Chief at the Triangle fire ordered just that--a stream aimed at the cornice over the windows to try to set up a water curtain as some protection for the people in the windows getting ready to jump. Maybe, just may, Worth hoped as did the other people on the street yelling "Don't jump" that they wouldn't jump if he got water on them. It was too late and Worth went to the Asch Building lobby to hold survivors inside to keep them from being killed by jumpers hitting the pavement with the force of a five ton truck smashing into a concrete wall at 60 miles an hour.

Worth arrived from his quarters on Mercer Street to the south of the Asch Building just after 72, which arrived almost at the same time as Engine 33, which is still quartered today at 22 East 12th Street, to the east of the Asch Building. Two engine companies and a battalion chief arrived in a minute and a half after the street box was pulled at 4:45 pm. Two engine companies quickly connected to a good water supply, quickly connected to the Washington Place standpipe, and quickly sent a four man team into the building lobby where they worked their way through the crowd of survivors exiting elevators and climbing down the narrow, spiral Washington Place stairwell. Up they went with a high rise pack following standard operating procedure to get water on the fire on the 8th floor as fast as they could, stopping at the standpipe connection at the landing on 7th floor, then stretching up another flight to the door that entered the 10,000 square foot loft factory with no fire breaks and no sprinklers. There they dropped below the smoke, and firefighters Bernard McKenney and John McNulty opened the nozzle and went to work as soon as the line was charged.

Sound familiar. The only difference between then and now is the missing self-contained breathing apparatus, SCBA, Scott pack, compressed air tank, whatever you want to call it. Standard tactics then and well into the 20th Century (read Dennis Smith's Report From Engine Co 82 and Pipe Nozzle); get down low and take the smoke as long as you can. Chief Croker wrote about fires where hose teams would stay at it until they were overcome and dragged back out to the street while another crew took over until they passed out also or the fire was knocked down. To paraphrase Dennis Smith, the Triangle fire was a tough, dirty, snotty job, but FDNY had water on a mass of flames on the 8th floor two minutes after arrival, or by about 4:49 or 4:50 pm. Five minutes after the telegraph alarm system sent the single from Box 289.

A second interior attack was launched from the Greene Street side of the Asch Building by Engine 18 (now Squad 18) when it arrived after a three minute run from 132 West 10th Street, northwest of the Asch Building. "Upon our arrival at the fire," said Captain Howard Ruch in court testimony, "we connected our hose to a hydrant on the corner of Waverly place and Greene street. We stretched the hose or laid out the hose from that hydrant about 200 feet south on Greene Street to a Siamese connection at the building line on the sidewalk; the Siamese connection led to a four-inch standpipe of the building on fire; we made the connection with the standpipe, when I looked around and saw or heard an awful shriek in the air . . ."

Jumpers.

Ruch had to stop setup to deploy a life net that proved useless in saving any of the jumpers; life nets worked up to six stories for one jumper at a time. He had to make the grim decision to keep moving into the building with a hose team, and they worked their way up to the 8th floor and used the same tactics used by the hose team from the Washington Place stairs, with one difference. Ruch reported that his team had to lay flat on the floor, forced down because of the smoke and heat coming right at them, but they didn't back off. With a hose team attacking from each side of the 8th floor and master steams throwing water into the windows from the street, it was all over in minutes, and the Ruch team moved on to the 9th floor.

72, 33, and 18 weren't alone, of course. BC Worth ordered a second alarm transmitted at 4:48 pm from box 289, and by the time the fire was under control in under a half hour, four alarms had been transmitted that brought 35 rigs to the fire.

On March 25, 1911, the FDNY made a good stop because of a quick response, well trained firefighters, good leadership, aggressive tactics, and superior equipment. They held the fire to the top three floors of Mr. Asch's building, which still sits on the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street today as the Brown Building on the New York University campus. They stopped a fire fueled by a hellish load of machine oil, wooden floors littered with cloth scraps, long wooden work benches, wicker baskets full of lace at sowing stations, bins below the cutter's tables full of cloth scraps, above which hung paper patterns. No fire breaks, windows blown out, and elevator shafts that served as giant flues for a 10,000 square foot factory floor that became a furnace where everything between the walls of the allegedly fireproof Asch Building burned.

146 Triangle Shirtwaist Company workers died---128 of them young women, 63 in their teens, 49 in their 20s--from falling when the one flimsy fire escape collapsed, falling or jumping into the elevator shafts, falling over a 100 feet to either Washington Place or Greene Street, and from burning to death when trapped at the locked door at the 9th floor exit to the Washington Place stairs.

Chief Croker wrote in his World's Work article that not too many days after the Triangle Fire another loft factory fire broke out on 14th Street. 400 workers, most of them women, evacuated without the loss of a single life because they had practiced evacuation---fire drills. But Chief Croker did not mentioned a more typical loft fire on March 12, 1911, when pure luck prevented

the disaster that occurred eleven days later. The New York Times reported that "prompt action by two boys saved scores of girls and men from a fire in the seven-story loft building at 158-160 Greene Street yesterday." Four blocks south of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. No deaths. Some escaped down the elevator, as they did at the Triangle fire. Some were trapped and had to crawl along the top of a cutter's table thrown across an air shaft to the next building. Some were rescued by the crew from Ladder 20, also the first ladder company at the Triangle fire and still quartered today in the same 1911 firehouse.

Man of his word

Edward Croker became FDNY chief through a Tammany Connection, his uncle Richard "Boss" Croker Sr., but Croker never used his position to launch a political career and remained outspoken about fire safety and prevention throughout his firefighting career---and after. But in his 1911 World's Work article, Croker clearly indicated that he was one of the psychological victims of the Triangle fire. He wrote about his building anxiety following the November 25, 1910, Newark factory fire that killed "twenty-five working girls." 19 of them were jumpers. Croker added that since Newark fire, the idea had been with him "night and day that it was time for somebody to begin thinking about preventing fires" He became that somebody after the Triangle fire. After his resignation Croker wrote Fire Prevention and formed a fire prevention company that is celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2011. If you will, for the rest of his life, Chief Croker evacuated the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory.

But before this piece gets maudlin with any conclusion about how Croker did not resign in vain (he didn't), about how the Triangle victims did not die in vain (they certainly did not), the title of Croker's article needs to be given here: Our Losing Fight Against Fire, which had this windy subtitle: Cases of Bravery and Danger to No Purpose--Improved Fighting Machinery, but No Gain on the Loss of Life and Property. That title echoes today.

The FDNY Fire Prevention Bureau Croker never had success in establishing arrived in 1912. Stronger fire codes and better enforcement of those codes gained political traction and government action after the Triangle fire. Fire protection equipment continually improved in the 100 years since Croker resigned. Firefighting equipment continually improved in the 100 years since Croker resigned, but the equipment still has the same purpose it did in 1911--to get to the fire as quickly as possible, to get people out of the burning building, and to get water on the fire. And the NFPA and the IAFF exist now. Yet both before and after the Triangle fire, with all the innovations in fire prevention and protection, mass casualty fires occurred and still do, and firefighters still get injured and killed.

Before Triangle, theater fires were a constant threat, and in 1903, Chicago's Iroquois Theater was packed with a standing-room-only crowd of 2000 for an Eddy Foy performance. 605 died in the fire. Before Triangle, school fires were a constant threat. In 1908, 175 children, most of them 6 and 7 years old, died in the Cleveland's Collingwood school fire. After the Triangle fire, night clubs were added to the list. In 1942, the Coconut Grove burned in Boston and killed 492 of the 1000 inside. And circus tents. In 1944, of the 7000 attending a circus in Hartford, Connecticut, 168 died and at least 700 were injured when the tent burned.

In short, Chief Croker and firefighters and fire marshals before and after the Triangle fire have never been able to eliminate the deadly intersection of Murphy's Law with an ever expanding human capacity for stupidity. In 1958, 92 students and three nuns died in Chicago's Our Lady of Angels school fire, many of them from jumping out of a building that had passed fire inspection. Same story as Triangle, one familiar then and now to firefighters. The three-story school was grandfathered into a meaningless fire code, an old fire safety code that meant the school passed inspection only by the letter of the law; the school had no automatic fire alarm, no heat detectors, no alarm connection to the fire department, no fire-resistant stairwells, and no fire doors. It was a trap.

In 2003, the Station Nightclub fire in West Warwick, Rhode Island killed 100, nearly 60 years after the Coconut Grove, and it was not the only mass casualty nightclub fire from 1944 to 2003. The Station fire spread in the same five minutes it took the Triangle fire to consume the 8th floor. Chief Worth reported that the 8th floor was fully involved when he got to the Asch Building, an assessment corroborated by New York City police officer James Meehan, the first public servant on the scene who helped evacuate the 8th floor when the fire was already just eight feet from the stairwell entrance. Meehan went down to the 6th to break down the door to help workers escape who had made it down the fire escape and into the 6th floor before the fire escape collapsed. Meehan then went back to the 8th, couldn't enter the floor and descended to the street as FDNY was setting up.

Nothing really has changed, and firefighters know it's not a matter of "If . . ." but "When . . ." because the fire service will never stop protecting people from themselves.

The post 9/11 world

Learning from the past is important, and the Triangle fire should never be forgotten. Prevention is important, which is why the rookie's Connecticut fire department always sent an engine company to stand by every time the circus came to town. And fire suppression remains critical, which is why the rookie's fire department used an aggressive interior attack in a dwelling that burned while the owner attended the circus with his family--the owner bypassed the circuit breakers to run a refrigerator in the basement.

And it remains essential for local government officials in cities large and small from New York to Camden to Cincinnati to San Jose to continue to cut fire protection budgets.