

Necessity of Fixing Responsibilities in Fires

Fires Are Not Due to Natural Causes But Are the Result in Most Cases of Carelessness or Crime—Need of Thorough Investigation of Fires to Determine Causes and Fix Responsibilities and Punish the Guilty—Fire Marshalls Should Be Appointed.

Henry Lye.

The old French Code, which held the person, in whose building a fire originated, responsible for all the consequences, may have been too harsh, but it was based upon the fact that fires are not natural, unavoidable occurrences, but are always the result of carelessness or of crime.

If there be "no effect without a cause" and if every fire endangers, if it does not destroy the lives and properties of innocent, careful people, then the cause of every fire should be thoroughly investigated by competent persons who should have power to cause the prosecution and punishment of those who are responsible for their occurrence.

There are several gradations of the punishment of persons who cause injury to the lives or limbs of human beings; it is difficult to understand why those who cause injury to property should not be dealt with in like manner!

The person who permits by his contrivance, or by his carelessness or his neglect, the existence of that which endangers or injures the life of another may be dealt with by boards of health or some other authority; but he who in such like manner injures the property of another goes scot free, because there is no thoroughness of investigation as to the cause of the fire.

When we read accounts of suicides or attempts at suicide we generally learn that they were caused by financial difficulties which led to the awful question, "to be or not to be." If the attempt at suicide be not successful then the bungler is punished. If it is successful there is no reticence in discussing the act as a natural result of the financial difficulties operating upon a weak or reckless mind, but when a fire occurs under similar circumstances the public wag the head without requiring the punishment or even the condemnation of the perpetrator.

It is as difficult to prove the cause of a suicide as it is to prove the "cause" of a fire, but reasonable common sense leads to the public conclusion in both cases. Unless the perpetrator in each such case gives notice, and so enables the production of a photograph of the actual commission of the act, there can be no absolute proof, yet the general conclusion is arrived at by circumstantial evidence as to the collateral circumstances.

If you analyse the statements which are published as to the causes of fires, you will find the majority of them stated as "unknown," so no lesson is learnt from them by means of which similar occurrences may be prevented, yet the fact remains that in many of these cases somebody does know that somebody should be punished.

The next largest list of fires is explained by criminal carelessness with matches, cigars and cigarettes, which should rank as to arson as manslaughter does to murder, and punished even more harshly because who so starts such a fire is reckless as to the danger or destruction of life as well as of property.

The hot-box of a factory or a saw mill is not a necessary result of the operations, but of the carelessness of the foreman or operative; yet he goes scot free, although he may have ruined his employer.

The foreman who leaves in the evening without being sure, or the watchman who is contented by the punching of his clock, without using his eyes or his nose, may be guiltless of intentional arson, but are in fact as guilty as the person who commits manslaughter, so should not go unpunished.

One of the difficulties is the want of a competent inspector, who should have the power and the duty of inspections such as would eliminate many of the causes of fire and of investigations which would lead to the conviction and punishment of those by whose act or neglect fires are caused.

These duties should not be left to incompetent or indifferent persons, nor should they who unofficially or officiously take action be subject to actions for libel or other forms of reprisals.

The following despatch narrates an all too common occurrence, and yet nothing is ever done about it:—

Ashcroft, B. C., Feb. 27.—A terrific explosion took place at P. Welch commissary camp, 100-Mile House, Cariboo Road, at 2 o'clock this afternoon, when a box of caps exploded, demolishing the guilding and seriously injuring Dr. Evans, employed by the P. G. E., G. Platt, one of the bookkeepers, and slightly injuring another bookkeeper named Gibbings, and Mr. Cronin, a contractor. Medical aid started from Ashcroft. The cause is thought to be from a cigarette stub. Dr. Evans and Platt are not expected to live.

RECENT FIRE LOSSES.

Recent fire losses reported to Superintendent of Insurance, Victoria:—

Grand Forks, February 15.—Market Street; owner and occupant, B. Laquinn; wood dwelling; value of building \$3,000, insurance on same \$2,800; value of contents \$1,800, insurance on same \$1,700. Total loss, \$2,600. Cause unknown. National, Ben Franklin, Nat. Fire of Paris, France, Phoenix of London.

Kelowna, February 14.—Barnard and Water Street; owner and occupant, Oakhall Clothing Co.; brick warehouse; value of building \$900, insurance on same \$500; value of contents \$7,000, insurance on same Blanket Policy of \$20,000 covering store as well. Total loss, \$7,500. Canadian Fire, London L. & Globe, Sun Fire, Northern, Guardian, St. Paul, Canadian Phoenix, Nova Scotia, Michigan Fire, Northwestern Mutual, British American.

Ladysmith, February 1.—French and Second Avenues; owner and occupant, Peter Rocco; wood dwelling; value of building \$1,000, insurance on same \$750; value of contents \$1,200, insurance on same \$1,000. Total loss, \$2,200. Cause unknown. London Assurance.

New Westminster, February 6.—Fourteenth Street; owner and occupant, British American Mills & Timber Co.; wood lumber yard and factory; value of building \$10,000, insurance on same \$5,000; value of contents \$50,000, insurance on same \$33,000. Total loss, \$60,000. Cause, hot bearing. Factories, Springfield, Michigan Commercial, Niagara, Law Union & Rock, New Zealand, West of Scotland, Pacific States, Occidental.

New Westminster, February 9.—Eighth and Agnes Streets; owner, J. B. Wilson; unoccupied; wooden store; value of building \$25,000, insurance on same \$15,000; value of contents \$1,500, insurance on same nil. Total loss, \$700. Cause, defective furnace. Home of N. Y., Phoenix of Hartford, St. Paul, Quebec, British American, Scottish Union.

North Cowichan, February 10.—Sec. 13, R. 3, Cowichan Dist.; owner, A. M. Rutherford Shaw; unoccupied; wood dwelling; value of building \$6,000, insurance on same \$3,000; value of contents \$3,000, insurance on same \$1,000. Total loss, \$9,000. Cause, might be incendiary. Mutual Fire Ins. Co. of B. C.

North Vancouver, February 4.—318 Twenty-first Street East; owner, F. Koch; occupant, F. Ucik; value of building \$900, insurance on same nil; value of contents \$100, insurance on same nil. Total loss, \$800. Cause unknown.

Vancouver, February 1.—4209 Slocan Street; owner and occupant, W. C. Martin; two-storey frame dwelling; value of building \$1,800, insurance on same \$1,500; value of contents \$1,200, insurance on same \$1,000. Total loss, \$2,800. Cause, overheated stove pipe from heater. Canadian Fire.

Maple Ridge, January 28.—Ontario Street, Port Haney; owner and occupant, C. A. Pelletier; wood and brick dwelling; value of building \$3,500, insurance on same \$2,300; value of contents \$1,500, insurance on same \$800. Total damage, \$710. Cause, wood from stove. Hudson Bay.