Review – Triangle: The Fire that Changed America

By Vicki Huebler, Michael Hupfauer, Barry Loudermilk, and Matthew Rice; Graduate Students at East Carolina University
Section I: Name of text and authors
Title: Triangle: The Fire That Changed America
Author: David Von Drehle
ISBN: 0-8021-4151-X (Paperback)
Publisher: Grove Press

Section II: Review of table of contents
The table of contents presents a chronological timeline of the events of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory disaster. Though the fire occurred in 1911, the framework of the text begins in 1909, describing the "Spirit of the Age." The book describes the actual events of the fire while describing character backgrounds and society's transitions. Chapters 1 through 4 establish the working conditions, lack of worker rights, and growing unrest of labor in early 20th century New York. These chapters also introduce the reader to labor and business leaders including Triangle factory owners, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris. Chapters 5 and 6 provide a graphic description of the events surrounding the fire from a variety of viewpoints including the trapped workers, company executives, first responders, and witnesses. Chapters 7 and 8 outline the response to the fire and attempts at reform of the working conditions of general labor. Chapter 9 focuses on the trial that resulted from the Triangle Fire and attempts to punish those responsible for the overall conditions. The epilogue, appendices, and notes allow the reader to become more intimate with the workers (both those that perished and survived).

Section III: Review of content
The target audience for this book includes people from all walks of life including immigration researchers, occupational safety and health professionals, social science professionals and anyone who has interest in the formation of the American society. This book is not a typical educational textbook; therefore, it is difficult to ascertain the accuracy of its content. However, the author goes to great lengths to document the content based on research of periodicals obtained from the time leading up to and immediately following the Triangle fire. The author also uses interviews documented in other books regarding the events surrounding the fire. The content of the book is extremely thorough, especially in providing background information regarding the social and political climate at the turn of the twentieth century. The author provides the reader with an understanding of many of the issues that lead to the great tragedy described in the book. The strength of this book is the author's ability to explain the amazingly complex social and political themes of immigration, socialism, suffrage, the labor union movement and progressivism during the turn of the twentieth century. The author effectively demonstrates how these themes contributed to the America of today and how they culminated in the deadliest workplace disaster until the events of September 11, 2001. The review of working conditions is slow at times and with the high level of detail included, such as specific names and the history of particular families, it can be distracting. The presentation of the union organizing and conflicts between unions can also be distracting in the text. However, in order to understand the motivation of
workers, it is useful for the reader to have knowledge of the background and interests of
many of the victims of the fire including their efforts at better working conditions.

The text appears to be extremely well researched and documented which results in the
detail of the Triangle fire being presented in Chapter 5. The flow might improve had the
details of the fire had been laid out earlier in the book with surrounding chapters
outlining the history prior to the fire. The pictures included in Chapter 7 are excellent for
the reader to gain an understanding of not only the fire but of the working conditions that
were an everyday part of worker life in the factory. Without the pictures, considering the
high level of detail about the placement of workers described in the book, the reader
would not have clear reference for the location of workers and the layout of the fire at the
factory. The pictures and illustrations are exceptional and could stand alone for teaching
purposes relating to the fire and aftermath. Chapter 9 is well presented and the
descriptions of the colorful lawyers involved added to the reader’s understanding of the
motivations of the major players. While the reader may certainly be disappointed with
the outcome of the trial, the public reaction is one in which most can easily identify.

The book is particularly important for safety and health professionals as it describes the
conflict between workers, management and the expectations of workers. There appears
to be a shortage of this type of history review for the safety professionals and students;
one that encompasses social history, details of a workplace tragedy and a conflict
between workers and bosses. The resources for this book are quite extensive, of good
quality, and are annotated in a bibliography at the end of the book. The resources include
newspapers, periodicals, books and dissertations. Visual aids include historic
photographs and detailed drawings based on historical evidence. The visual aids provide
additional insight and are essential for the reader to understand the events of the book.
There are no supporting materials with this book as this is a standard, non-fiction book
and not an educational textbook. We did find a very thorough supplemental web site on
the Triangle Fire hosted by Cornell University’s Industrial and Labor Relations School.
See http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/.

This book would be best suited as an additional reading requirement in a writing/reading
intensive undergraduate fire safety course or to supplement a similar graduate level
course, which is how it will be utilized at East Carolina University. This book does not
include learning objectives, guiding questions, or conclusions at the end of every
chapter. This "setback," however, is what makes this text great for examining the social
impacts of safety. Due to the descriptive nature of the text, readers have been presented
with a case study that allows examination of deeper issues. The teaching characteristics
of this book are flexible in that it accommodates open discussion and can be tailored to fit
the needs or context of any student. The aspects of deficient management systems and
human error that occur in a fire are repeated many times in not only our past but also
recent history, such as the 1991 Hamlet, NC poultry plant fire and the 2003 Station night
club fire in Rhode Island.
Section IV: Overall recommendation
This book is a must read for safety and health professionals and any student with aspirations of entering the field due to its profound effect on the workplace safety movement. The book will provide a fantastic addition to any curriculum involving social science, occupational safety and health, fire safety, American history or political science. We encourage safety educators to discuss the book with faculty members in other disciplines in a collaborative educational manner. It can also be used as a refresher and reminder to practicing safety professionals that paying attention to the details and avoiding these incidents is the core of our professional existence. It is our responsibility as safety professionals and educators to help students, management, and workers to learn from our past, anticipate and eliminate hazards, while developing and implementing solutions for continual improvement. As George Santayana stated, "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

Section V: Reviewers
The reviewers were graduate students in a course facilitated by Michael Behm in East Carolina University’s Occupational Safety Program and are listed below in alphabetical order.

Vicki Huebler
Michael Hupfauer
Barry Loudermilk
Matthew Rice