

RealStyle by Patricia McLaughlin

REMEMBER THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FACTORY FIRE

Think union fat cats and government over-regulation are destroying America? Try telling Rose Oringer's cousin Leigh and Andrew Ott's grandson Ray.

"No one remembers anything in America," Frank Rich began a recent column. It's a lead sentence that could go in any of a million directions, so central is our national predisposition to amnesia -- and a blithe, willful amnesia at that -- to so many of the issues that bedevil us.

Rich's column was about the Great Government Shutdown of 1995, already largely unremembered and widely assumed to be non-analogous to anything that might happen now or ever again. This one is about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire; on March 25, it will be 100 years ago that it killed 146 garment workers in New York in a matter of minutes.

With its rows of tucks, ruching, embroidery and lace insertions, the shirtwaist -- we'd call it a blouse now -- looks delicate, feminine, sweetly old-fashioned. But in its day it was revolutionary: American women started wearing blouses with long dark skirts before the turn of the century when they began to work outside of their homes, and needed practical clothes for travel and business.

Because shirtwaists were worn bloused out over the waistband of the skirt, creating the pigeon-breasted silhouette familiar from Charles Dana Gibson's "Gibson Girl" illustrations, their fit was less demanding than that of a dress.

That meant they could be mass-produced in factories.

The Triangle Waist Co., which occupied the four top floors of a modern skyscraper on Washington Square in New York, was a leading manufacturer. The fire that killed so many of its employees stayed on the front pages for months: mass demonstrations, outpourings of grief, investigations, hearings, blue-ribbon commissions, editorials, demands that the victims, mostly young women and girls, should not have died in vain.



Members of the United Hebrew Trades of New York and Local 25 of the Ladies Waist and Dressmakers Union joined 400,000 New Yorkers in solemn procession on April 5, 1911, the day the last six unidentified victims of the Triangle fire were buried. It was only this year that the identities of those last six were confirmed. Photo from "Triangle: Remembering the Fire," courtesy of HBO.

Out of it came new laws, new regulations, new power for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union.

We may not remember it, but we live with its effects: mandatory fire drills, sprinkler systems, occupancy limits, clearly marked exits, fire doors that open easily and outwards, fire escapes built to bear the weight of more than a few people at a time.

These things seem so obvious now. The sad thing is: They were obvious then. A documentary that premieres March 21 on HBO makes the point that, before the fire, New York's fire chief had been lobbying for stronger fire safety measures, but to no avail.

Fire drills took time away from work, and they were optional, not required. Sprinklers cost money, and they were optional, too. Wide stairways took up space that could be used for production. Sturdy fire escapes cost more than flimsy ones.

"If there's no regulation," Raymond Ott, a New York fire marshal, tells the camera, "people will cut corners, and they'll take the chance ..."

Ott's grandfather, a fireman on one of the first hook-and-ladders to reach the scene that day, saw girls holding onto their purses as they jumped from the ninth-floor windows. Some jumped holding hands, two and three at a time. Falling so far, they tore through the firemen's nets. Some crashed through the deadlights, the thick glass sidewalk inserts meant to provide

light to the cellars.

The stairwells were too narrow to accommodate exit doors that opened out. On the ninth floor, where 50 workers burned to death, and from whose window ledges more than 90 leapt to their deaths, there were only two exits to evacuate 400 workers; one of them was kept locked to deter pilfering. The fire escape collapsed, dropping the people it was meant to save to their deaths.

The makers of the HBO film went looking for relatives of the fire's victims and its survivors, and found them.

Memories of that

day had been passed down in their families, a legacy of grief and horror, helplessness and anger too painful to be talked about much, but kept alive out of a sense of obligation to the dead: The young man who escaped the burning building, but went back for his father's gold watch. The grandfather who lost his wife and both his teenage daughters that day. The sister who lost her sister in the smoke and never again saw her alive. The heroic elevator operators who rescued hundreds, taking their cars back up into the inferno seven and eight times until they could no longer rise against the weight of the bodies of those who had jumped or fallen into the open shaft.

Only a year before, many of the same girls whose singed and broken bodies lay three and four deep in front of the building at the end of the day had been on strike, walking a picket line on that same sidewalk. They'd been taunted by hired thugs, beaten by police, arrested and jailed. Their strike failed to win Triangle's recognition of their union, or things might have been different.

Leigh Benin, a labor historian at Adelphi University and a cousin of 19-year-old Rose Oringer, who jumped from the ninth floor to her death that day, tells the camera, "If people want to know what deregulated industry would look like, look at the bodies on the sidewalk."