

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 4: "City of Immigrants"

Triangle Fire Survivors' Accounts

These four interviews were done in 1957 with four women who had worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and survived the fire of March 25, 1911. In the interviews the women describe what happened on the day of the fire, and how they were able to escape. The doors on each floor of the factory were kept locked so that workers could not leave without permission, leaving many women trapped inside the factory during the fire because of the locked doors.

Dora Appel Skalka

Job: Blouse Maker, 8th floor

Interview: July 31, 1957

I worked at the Triangle Shop for nine weeks before the fire.

I came up to work with my girl friend named Pauline and I worked together with her. I remember on the day of the fire she said to me let's stop early today and let's go home earlier. We got paid at a quarter to four and I said why should we lose an hour work but she would not listen. She went home early and left me to work alone. This time because she went home earlier I decided to stop earlier too. So I went to the dressing room earlier than I usually did. I was at the door of the dressing room and was about to go in when I heard screaming in the back of me.

I turned around and saw that the fire was already burning at the cutting table. My machine was in the first row next to the cutting table and if my girl friend did not go home earlier, I am sure I would have been one of the first victims.

But I was standing at the door of the dressing room with two or three other girls and we ran to the door of the Greene St. staircase. It was closed. All around me there was hollering. In a split second the place filled up with black smoke. I remained at the door. I did not move. I could not holler. I thought to myself at least I want to die by the door.

I don't remember exactly how it happened but somebody opened the door from the outside. It was either a fireman or policeman who smashed in the door, which was always locked. He grabbed us and told us to go down the staircase and he took us down to the 6th floor and left us there. He must have gone back upstairs.

When I finally came downstairs in the lobby they were crying and hysterical but they would not let us out. There were maybe 20 or 30 people in the lobby. Some were crying and hysterical but they would



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not let us out. When we finally got out of the lobby into the street I could see why - because there, smashed on the sidewalk, were the beautiful faces of those who were my neighbors at the machines.

Rose Indursky

Job: Sleeve Setter, 9th floor

Interview: September 19, 1957

I was a sleeve setter. That day everybody couldn't wait to go home. There was a Ball or something and everybody was going. When I went out into the hall staircase I bent down and looked downstairs and I could see the fire come up. In the shop the girls were running around with their hair burning.

First I ran into the dressing room with the machinist and some of the others. Then the walls in the dressing room began to smoke. The machinist had a wild look in his eye. We ran back into the shop; girls were lying on the floor, fainted, and people were stepping on them. Some of the other girls were trying to climb over the machines. I remember the machinist ran to the window and he smashed it to let the smoke that was choking us go out. Instead, the flames rushed in. I stood at the window; across the street people were hollering "don't jump, don't jump." I turned around and ran to the hall staircase door. My hair was smoldering -- my clothes were torn. I put my two hands on my smoldering hair and ran up the stairs. I went into the 10th floor. Nobody was there except one man, bookkeeper. He was picking up papers and he hollered to me, can you come to the roof, can you come to the roof. By that time, all the windows on the 10th floor were burning. My life was saved on account of the bookkeeper. I didn't know that the next floor was the roof. I think if not for him I would have stayed on the 10th floor and maybe had been killed.

Rose Hauser

Job: Unknown, 9th floor

Interview: September 4, 1958

On the floor a gong used to ring when the day was over. About five minutes before quitting time I sneaked into the dressing room. There were a few girls in the dressing room. I used to sing a lot in the shop, some of the girls asked me to sing a song while we were getting dressed. They asked me to sing -- I still remember the name of the song -- "Every Little Movement Has a Meaning of Its Own". They insisted that I sing so I did my little act in the dressing room. As soon as I finished the song I heard the bell ring but it seemed to me that it was a little bit too soon.



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We were never allowed to go down the front way -- either by elevator or staircase. We always went by the freight [elevator], which was in the back. When I got out of the dressing room I looked toward the freight elevator and I saw smoke pouring up. The smoke was also coming out of the staircase. I ran with some of the other girls to the front door. I put my hand on the knob and tried to open it and I stood there screaming that the door was locked. I tried to force it open with all my strength but it would not move.

I looked around and I saw the flames coming in all the windows. The fire was in the shop and was coming toward us. There was a fire escape at the windows near the freight side. The fire escapes had iron doors and shutters. Everybody was running and hollering and people were choking from the heavy smoke. I took my muff (a warm, fur covering for the hands) and put it over my head. I ran back to the front elevator and there was no chance there. I kept my muff on my head and ran toward the freight side again. I found that the door to the back staircase was open and that is how I got out.

When I began to go down to the 8th floor, I was choking. The fire was in the hall on the 8th floor. I put my muff around my head tightly and I ran right through the fire. The fur caught on fire. When we got down stairs they kept us in the hall and they wouldn't let us go into the street because the bodies were falling down.

Celia Walker Friedman

Job: Examiner, 9th floor

Interviewed: August 8, 1957

On the day of the fire I had gotten my clothes. I stood at my table ready to leave. I looked across the shop. In front of me I saw flames on the outside of the windows shooting up. The flames were climbing up from the 8th floor. I was scared and it seemed to me that even before I could move, everybody in the shop started to scream and holler. The girls at the machines began to climb up on the machine tables maybe because it was that they were frightened or maybe they thought they could run to the elevator doors on top of the machines. The aisles were narrow and blocked by the chairs and baskets. They began to fall in the fire. I know now that there was a fire escape in back of me but I ran to the elevator because that was the only place to run to.

The door to the stairway was completely blocked by the big crates of blouses and goods. The fire crept closer to us and we were crowded at the elevator door banging and hollering for the elevator. The first time it came up, the girls rushed in and it was crowded in a half a second. The elevator driver struggled with the door and finally closed it and went down with the screaming girls. I was left with those who didn't make the first trip. Then the elevator came up a second



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time. The girls were all squeezing against the door and the minute it was opened they rushed again. This time I was sure I would be lucky and get in. I rushed with the other girls but just as I came to the door of the elevator it dropped down right in front of me. I could hear it rush down and I was left standing on the edge trying to hold myself back from falling into the shaft. I held on to the two sides of the open door. Behind me the girls were screaming and I could feel them pushing me more and more. I knew that in a few seconds I would be pushed into the shaft and I made a quick decision. Maybe through panic or maybe through instinct I saw the center cable of the elevator in front of me. I jumped and grabbed the cable. That is all I remember.

My next thing I knew was when I opened my eyes and I was lying on my back and I looked up into the faces of a priest and a nun who were trying to help me. I was in St. Vincent's Hospital. Everybody thought I was going to die. They found me at the bottom of the [elevator] shaft. I had saved myself by my jumping. I was very lucky. My head was injured and I had a broken arm and a broken finger. I had a large searing scar down the middle of my body, burned by the friction of the cable, which had cut through my clothing. In the hospital, later, I was shown a large ripped piece of fur and fabric.

One of the nurses said she thought it was wonderful that I had enough presence of mind when I jumped to wrap something around my hands in order to save them and to be able to hold on to the cable. I know it was not presence of mind or courage. I think the right word is vanity (too much pride in one's appearance). This was a new muff (warm, fur covering for the hands) that I had bought after saving for it many weeks and fire or no fire, something in me made me hold on to it even while I jumped to save my life. I don't know how long I stayed in St. Vincent's but when I was well the Red Cross came with my clothing which they got from my family and took me straight to the mountains for a rest. At the same time, the Red Cross paid my family \$10 a week for 10 weeks. I never got a dime's worth of help from the company.

Source: Survivor Interviews, *Remembering the 1911 Triangle Fire and Its Aftermath* website, Kheel Center, School of Industrial and Labor Relations, Cornell University
(<http://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/primary/survivorInterviews/>)

