

Eating Smoke: Fire in Urban America, 1800–1950. *By Mark Tebeau.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. xi + 425 pp. Index, notes, appendix, illustrations. Cloth, \$49.95. ISBN: 0-801-86791-6.

Reviewed by Carl Smith

Mark Tebeau's ambitious, informative, and absorbing book explains, among many other fascinating things, why little boys want to become firemen and not fire-insurance brokers. After all, firemen valiantly defend property and people against flames and devastation. Meanwhile, insurers coolly calculate how they might turn a profit by selling financial protection against an abstract possibility. Tebeau argues that despite this and other significant differences, the two callings evolved in similar ways and, in the process, reshaped the urban built environment and urban culture itself.

As Tebeau points out, fire was the great scourge of urbanizing America. Even before the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, fully four hundred large conflagrations struck thirty leading American cities. Fire hazards multiplied as cities became larger, more densely populated, and more technologically advanced. Once aflame, newer buildings constructed of supposedly "fireproof" materials in fact burned hotter and longer than wooden ones (of which plenty remained) and posed difficulties of access (among other things, they were much taller). Like so many other vocations in modernizing America, firefighters and fire insurers responded by becoming more scientific and professional, which meant relying on new hardware and management technologies. Such changes were instrumental in leveling off property losses by 1920 and in reducing them by 1930.

As Tebeau explains, neither fire departments nor fire-insurance companies as we know them even existed until around 1800. Local citizens formed bucket brigades and property owners organized mutual societies. The first half of the nineteenth century was the heyday of volunteer firemen, who paradoxically pursued the civic ideals of public spirit and civic responsibility by appropriating the job of fighting fire to themselves. They introduced important innovations, starting with hoses, though they also were unruly and tribal, more interested sometimes in beating out (or even beating up) rival companies than in dousing a blaze. Meanwhile, new joint-stock fire insurance companies were

constructing a market in fire risk; some built national networks that subsequently proved less vulnerable to a single catastrophic fire than competing local firms. While at first insurers calculated their policies on the character of the property owner rather than the property, as the century unfolded they viewed the expanding, industrializing, and diversifying urban environment as an aggregate of ever more detailed statistics, maps, and reports on which to base their bet that this or that building would, or would not, go down in flames.

Tebeau divides his history into four periods: 1800–1850, 1850–1875, 1875–1900, and 1900–1950. In several ways, the two middle periods are the most interesting. This is when political leaders, insurance companies, and property holders demanded an end to the volunteer companies in order to force the implementation of rationalized work rules and improved technologies. Firemen resisted external control, but they nonetheless developed more sophisticated procedures and equipment that helped lead to the emergence of fully professional and hierarchical salaried departments. In time, they coordinated different specialized tasks, followed printed regulations, and conducted training and drills.

The rank and file lost some, though by no means all, of their “bully-boy” camaraderie, but they gained status as popular heroes because of their new emphasis on saving lives as well as property. This shift in priorities required climbing ladders, entering burning buildings, and, of course, “eating” smoke, sometimes a more deadly antagonist than fire. For their part, fire insurers continued to focus mainly on determining the possibility of loss with greater precision. To be fair, insurers were running a business, and Tebeau makes a good case that they did considerable public service—albeit with their eyes on the bottom line—in making the city safer, even if they eschewed fire prevention until the turn of the twentieth century. They advocated comprehensive water systems and building codes, and they withheld coverage unless certain safety measures were taken. In addition, they encouraged clients to be more vigilant by insuring property for less than it was actually worth. Firemen also assumed fire inspection and prevention responsibilities that altered the way individual buildings and the urban infrastructure were designed and maintained.

Tebeau could have made some of his cultural arguments a little stronger, especially in his extensive discussion of evolving notions of class and manhood in both professions. While he does a better job of dealing with this issue in his descriptions of the firemen—fire companies occasionally demonstrated their manliness in such subtle ways as displaying how high their hoses could spray—he sometimes treats both the working class and the middle class as monoliths. A little more particularity would have helped here, whether in the form of finer distinctions or more individual stories. There are other gaps: Tebeau might have provided additional details to corroborate his interesting speculations on the kinds of men who were drawn to firefighting, perhaps saying more about just who became volunteers, why they so resisted being paid, and what lay behind their ambivalent attitude toward new technologies. He also could have written more about the relationship between firemen and other skilled laborers in urbanizing America, as well as about how the insurance business differed from other white-collar industries. On a darker note, Tebeau might have discussed at greater length the tactics adopted by both firemen and insurers in discriminating against certain neighborhoods and certain people in America's cities.

Such criticisms should not overshadow this book's strengths, however. While Tebeau's analysis is national in scope, he focuses in effective detail on pioneering fire insurers Aetna and INA, firefighters in Philadelphia and St. Louis, and two leading professional organizations, the National Board of Fire Underwriters and the International Association of Engineers. His use of archival and printed material is wide and deep, and he includes a superb essay on sources. Given all the separate and intersecting intricacies of the two major stories he is telling, Tebeau has undertaken almost as complex a task as those of his two main subject groups in confronting American urban fire, and to a very impressive extent he has mastered it.

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