Eating Smoke

Tebeau, Mark

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Tebeau, Mark.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23181

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=839582
Preface and Acknowledgments

My father was a firefighter. I remember feeling pride when he visited my second grade class on fire prevention day. I remember telephoning and speaking to him at the engine house every night before I went to bed. I remember the “firestorm” of 1976 and the burn he received. I remember his coming home in the morning to fix me breakfast, sometimes smelling of smoke.

Although he never spoke of his work, I knew what he did. In a world where job titles mean little, my father’s said a lot. After twenty years on the job, he retired, abruptly and without much fanfare. He took another job with one of those meaningless titles—control operating engineer, or something like that, at an electrical utility. We moved to a larger house, in the suburbs. We achieved the American dream, but at what cost? I wondered, at the time, what did he give up? What did the change mean to him? Can you stop being a fireman?

I returned to these questions as I foraged for a dissertation topic. In that I was interested in gender, technology, and cities, it occurred to me that writing a history of firefighting and fire protection might be a good idea. Amazed when I discovered that no historian had examined the topic in great depth, I found an engrossed audience when I sheepishly suggested the vague outlines of this project. My father even inspired the title when we had one of our few conversations about firefighting. He mentioned off-handedly that many firefighters really disliked wearing their breathing apparatus, and that “old-timers” in particular believed that real firemen would not wear them at all.

The personal meaning of this work increased when, as I made final revisions on the manuscript, terrorists attacked the World Trade Center. My first thought as I watched the buildings collapse was of the hundreds of firefighters who were dying, and of their fatherless children. Although I was a child of a former firefighter, my research had taught me something that I never knew as a kid. After years of studying fire protection, I had learned about the job’s many dangers: I had read countless stories in which falling walls had killed firemen who struggled to penetrate to the interior of buildings to perform rescues and throw water on the fire.

This project began as a dissertation, and was nurtured also by public historians
working in history museums. Joel Tarr, John Modell, and Rick Maddox advised me and read this work. They encouraged me to freely explore issues that other professional historians thought uninteresting and unimportant. Each brought something special to the project and made it better. Joel has guided my professional development, and helped to ground this story in the history of American cities; John’s eclectic but rigorous approach to scholarship promoted creative thought and allowed me to experiment with ideas, methods, and sources; Rick’s ability to move between theory and history proved inspiring; his close reading helped me to find this book’s argument. As the project developed, I also discovered sources and colleagues in historical societies and libraries. Public historians shared with me their craft, and they enhanced this work by making me more sensitive to sources other than the printed documents on which historians almost exclusively rely. By introducing me to the richness of American material culture, these historians—such as Cory Amsler at the Bucks County Historical Society—transformed my understanding of this subject and improved this work.

The project received financial support from Carnegie Mellon University, the Missouri Historical Society, the National Museum of American History (at the Smithsonian Institution), the Pennsylvania Historical and Museums Commission, and the Pennsylvania Humanities Council, both of which supported my work as curator on a firefighting exhibition at the Bucks County Historical Society, the Graduate School of Business at Harvard University, and Cleveland State University.

Over the past decade many historians, researchers, friends, and colleagues influenced my training and thinking and/or read parts of this manuscript or reviewed pieces of the larger project at different times. I thank: Keith Allen, Cory Amsler, Mary Blewett, Eileen Boris, Tom Buchanan, Liz Cohen, Herrick Chapman, Jim Grossman, David Hounshell, Tom Humphrey, Andrew Hurley, Meg Jacobs, Elizabeth Johns, Miriam Kaprow, Linda Kerber, Bill Kenney, Carol Lasser, Steve Lubar, Robert McCarl, Clay McShane, Larry Peskin, Carroll Pursell, Steven Pyne, Don Ramos, Peter Rutkoff, Eric Sandweiss, Mark Santow, Will Scott, Barbara Clark Smith, Peter Stearns, Shirley Wadja, Sam Watson, Mark Wilkens, Helena Wright, Marilyn Zoidis, Michael Zuckerman. At the Johns Hopkins University Press, Bob Brugger, Melody Herr, Marie Blanchard, and an anonymous reader exhibited patience and shepherded this project to press.

Numerous archives, museums, and historical societies provided access and graciously helped me in my research: Baker Library at Harvard University, the National Museum of American History at the Smithsonian Institution, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the New York Historical Society, the New York Public Library, Bancroft Library at the Univer-
Preface and Acknowledgments

I have been very fortunate, and I am especially grateful to many people for helping me complete this project. In particular, I thank the many libraries that provided access to primary sources: the University of California, Berkeley, the Free Library of Philadelphia. The Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies provided me access to the libraries at the University of Pennsylvania, the Bucks County Historical Society, Carnegie Mellon University libraries, the Missouri Historical Society, the Mercantile Library of St. Louis, the St. Louis Public Library, the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, the University of Pittsburgh libraries, the Library of Congress, the Hall of Flame in Phoenix, Fireman’s Hall Museum in Philadelphia, and the CIGNA Archives and the Museum and Art Collection.

I received special assistance from a number of individuals in the library and firefighting communities: Sue Collins at CMU, Marianne Nolan at Cleveland State, Betsy Smith at the Spruance Library of the Bucks County Historical Society, Emily Miller and Martha Clevenger at the Missouri Historical Society, Leslie Simon, archivist at CIGNA, Sue Levy and Melissa Hough at the CIGNA Museum and Art Collection, Ellen Morfei at ACE America, Allan Haddox at the American Insurance Association, Ward Childs and Jefferson Moak of the Philadelphia City Archives, Harry Magee and Dan Kenney at Fireman’s Hall, Pete Molloy at the Hall of Flame, Peter St. Clair of the Arlington Fire Department, Neil Svetanics, former fire chief of the St. Louis Fire Department, Harold Hairston, commissioner of the Philadelphia Fire Department.

Friends and family have been supportive and understanding; they have offered a place to stay, entertained me, and shared their lives: Mark Schleinitz and Melissa Fischer, Neil Chriss, Jeff and Val Cohen, Scott Feldman and Stephanie Lubin, Mark Kochvar and Vicki Helgeson, Cory Amsler and Eileen Shapiro, Cheryl Wheeler, Karl Kilgore, and Charly Shapiro, Cheryl Wheeler, Karl Kilgore, and Charly Shapiro, Mark and Shana Santow, Mark Wilkens, Madi Goodman and Andrew Mossin, and Kian Wright. Dan and Sandy Mickelson provided emotional and economic support as I followed this project across the country. They believed in it and me, and they knew when not to ask if it was finished.

In many respects, this book is about my family; it is about the world my parents—Ralph and Lois Tebeau—created. They respected knowledge and encouraged me to follow my heart. They made many sacrifices so that I might have an easier path. Few of us have the privilege of knowing our parents; working on this project allowed me to learn more about their lives, especially part of my father’s.

Kristin Mickelson has lived with this project longer than anyone. She saw it arrive, take its first steps, and then meander in the academic wilderness. She supported me in more ways than I can count, offered her expertise as a statistician, and encouraged me to find a voice with her own wit and style. She makes the world more imaginative, beautiful, and moral; best of all, she gave me Amelia and Eli.
This page intentionally left blank
Eating Smoke
This page intentionally left blank