

## Digital Media Reviews

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*Triangle Factory Fire Online Exhibit.*

<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire>

(accessed November 7 and November 10, 2009)

March 25, 2011, is the hundredth anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the tragic disaster in a New York City sweatshop that claimed the lives of 146 people, mostly young Italian and Jewish immigrant women. Interest in the fire is likely to increase as the anniversary approaches, but the events of that fateful day in 1911 already comprise one of the most well-known episodes of American labor history. Without any embellishment, the story has all the elements of drama: Young women working for paltry wages are locked inside a factory building by profit-hungry owners who prohibited unionization and resisted efforts to implement safety measures. A fire breaks out. Many of the women, unable to get out because of the locked doors and lack of fire escapes, plunge to their death on the sidewalk below. Newspapers trumpet the horrible details while grief-stricken families quietly mourn their loved ones. Factory owners are acquitted of any wrongdoing, but reforms to industrial safety and fire codes are enacted at the behest of outraged members of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, the Socialist Party, and other workers' and fraternal organizations, as well as citizens with no prior connection to the labor movement. The high degree of interest in this story that continues today, especially among middle and high school students, prompted the Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives at Cornell University to establish a web-based exhibit on the Triangle fire.

The online exhibit (accessed on November 7 and November 10, 2009), located at <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire>, uses a narrative frame to tell the story of the Triangle fire within the larger context of American labor history, specifically, the exploitation of garment workers and the unionization drive within that industry. A combination of words and visual images on the home page invites visitors into the site. Sitting on a black background is a black-and-white photo of firefighters attempting to put out the flames in the ten-story Asch building that housed the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. The contrast between the black background and the photo, edited to look as if it is charred around the edges, is striking. Text on top of the photo announces "Near closing time on Saturday afternoon, March 25, 1911, a fire broke out . . ." The red typeface for the text provides added contrast and suggests the heat of fire. Ellipses at the end of the phrase lead readers' eyes to links that are grouped under three headings—*Story of the Fire*, *Sources*, and *Other Resources*—each of which appears in a glowing orange font with a red background. The only other photo on the page is that of one of the heroes of the fire, the elevator boy, Joseph Zito, who made multiple trips to the ninth floor, carrying twenty-five to thirty people down each time. Oddly, Zito's photo appears above the *Criminal Trial Transcripts* link.

Visitors to the site can follow the various links in any order, but those under *The Story of the Fire* offer a chronological account. It begins with a brief introduction that highlights the historical and contemporary significance of the Triangle tragedy: "One of the worst disasters since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution," the fire

remains important to this day, “because it highlights the inhumane working conditions to which industrial workers can be subjected.” The next link, *Sweatshops and Strikes*, provides a description of working conditions and labor activism before 1911, including the famous Uprising of the Twenty Thousand in 1909, and a primer on sweatshops in the contemporary United States by UNITE! (Union of Needle Trades, Industrial, and Textile Employees). Subsequent links—*Fire!*, *Mourning and Protest*, *Relief Work*, and *Investigation, Trial, and Reform*—vividly recount the events of March 25 and afterwards. Peppered throughout are additional links to a rich variety of primary sources held by the Cornell University Library. Verbal documents, including letters, poems, newspaper articles, and the criminal trial transcripts give a sense of the lives of garment workers, the dangers of the factory, and the politics of union organizing. Photos show poverty, harsh working conditions, and the performance of class and ethnic solidarity. Cartoons are particularly memorable, with striking images that range from the poignant to the macabre. Audio recordings of interviews with three survivors, one of whom, Pauline Pepe, was an Italian American, convey the most deeply personal views of the fire. Links to the list of victims and that of witnesses reinforce the personal aspect of the tragedy.

Students, educators, and others who want access to additional information and resources about the fire can follow links to a selected bibliography with juvenile, primary, secondary, and audiovisual sources, as well as instructional materials for educators. Young researchers may also wish to consult a helpful set of “Tips for Student Projects” that explains the difference between primary and secondary sources and offers instructions for proper citation.

As conveyed by the web text and primary sources, the story of the Triangle fire is a story about the effects of industrialization on people. If the comments in the Visitor’s Book for the site are any indication, almost a hundred years later, the deaths of so many young female workers in a factory fire still has a powerful effect on those who come into contact with it.

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*A Blog from WWII. Diary of an Italian Deportee.*

<http://anitaliandeportee.org>

(accessed April 23, 2009–November 12, 2009)

The title of this online narrative, *A Blog from WWII. Diary of an Italian Deportee*, evokes the jarring image of soldiers and prisoners with laptops in their hands, as opposed to the pen and paper of letters or old notebooks. Building on such a paradox, this website joins possibility and impossibility, past and present, under the sign of computer science. The website offers a digitized version (in both the original Italian and an English translation) of the entire diary of Oreste Maina, who was deported from Italy to Germany in 1943. This review covers the diary from its first