

1932

## EC5590b A Trial of Fire

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Nebraska  
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION WORK  
IN AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS  
U. of N. Agr. College & U. S. Dept. of Agr. Cooperating  
W. H. Brokaw, Director, Lincoln

Extension  
Circular  
55906

1932

A TRIAL OF FIRE

Prepared by the National Board of Fire Underwriters, 85 John Street, New York City,  
for Nebraska's Fire Prevention Manual prepared by Chloe C. Baldrige.

(A Mock Trial Staged with a Certain Amount of Poetic License)

CAUTION--In presenting this playlet, the use of paper or other ignitable material  
for costumes should be avoided.

(Considerable liberty has been taken in the matter of court procedure, and the follow-  
ing lines should not be criticized too severely from the technical standpoint.)

SCENE: COURT ROOM

There should be a large chair and table for the Judge's bench if nothing  
more fitting is available. There should also be a chair and table for the Clerk of  
the Court, a witness chair beside the Judge's bench, and chairs for the twelve jury-  
men and for spectators. Various persons should be designated to represent the differ-  
ent fire hazards.

The use of special costumes is optional, but, if used, they should not be  
made of paper or other readily ignitable material. It will answer every purpose if  
inscribed placards are hung about the necks of those taking part.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Judge  
Court Officer

The District Attorney  
Counsel for the Defense

Clerk of the Court  
The Jury

THE DEFENDANTS

(The Major Causes of Fire).

Kerosene	Electricity	Defective Chimney	Bonfire
Cigarette	Rubbish	Gasoline	Spontaneous Combustion
Match	Gas	Lightning	The Arch Criminal, Carelessness

The Judge enters after all have assembled. The different defendants (the  
hazards) are led in by the Court Officer. Everybody stands as the Judge enters.

CLERK: (Standing) Hear ye, hear ye. All ye who have business with this honorable court  
draw near and present your petitions. (No one moves. He continues) The first  
case on the docket is that of the People vs. Fire.

JUDGE: I assume that the formalities have been observed.

CLERK: Yes, Your Honor.

JUDGE: Are the Counsel ready for trial?

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: The People are ready, Your Honor; the defendants should have been  
brought to trial years ago.

JUDGE: Who is appearing for the defense?

COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENSE (rising): I am, Your Honor. I wish to say that there are  
eleven defendants involved in this action. Each defendant will speak for himself.

JUDGE: Very well. We will proceed. (Looks at paper.) I see that Kerosene is charg-  
ed with having wilfully caused the death of a little girl and boy and the destruc-  
tion of their home. Clerk, call the defendant.



CLERK (calling): Kerosene to the bar.

JUDGE: Kerosene, you have heard the charge, what is your plea?

KEROSENE: Not guilty

JUDGE: Have you any witnesses?

KEROSENE: I am my own witness.

JUDGE: Clerk, swear the witness.

CLERK: Do you solemnly swear that you will speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

KEROSENE: I do.

JUDGE: What have you to say for yourself?

KEROSENE: May I tell you how it happened in my own way?

JUDGE: Yes, go on.

KEROSENE: I was enclosed in my usual container, Your Honor, waiting to be of service and doing no one any harm, when the little girl came into the kitchen and poured me into the kitchen stove because she thought the fire was not burning fast enough. It was not my fault, Your Honor, that I was kept in the kitchen where I had no business to be; it was not my fault that the child was allowed to handle me and I could not help myself when I touched the flame; I flashed back, of course, exploded the can and burned the little girl to death. I also burned her brother who was playing nearby on the floor. There would have been no fire, Your Honor, if the family had been careful and the children had not been allowed to play with fire.

JUDGE: I recognize the truth of your story, Kerosene, and dismiss the case against you. (Kerosene takes seat at one side.)

JUDGE: What is the next case?

CLERK: It is all part of the same case, Your Honor; the next defendant is Cigarette.

JUDGE: If there are many more defendants in this case swear them in at once.

CLERK: (turning to those representing hazards): Do you solemnly swear that you will speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?

CHORUS: We do.

CLERK: Cigarette to the bar. (Cigarette comes forward.)

JUDGE: Tell us just what happened.

CIGARETTE: I was in a man's pocket in a warehouse, Your Honor, where a dangerous chemical was being stored. The man knew it was against the rules to smoke me, but he was reckless and "took a chance". When I was almost consumed he threw me to the floor. This ignited some of the chemical scattered about and caused it to explode the entire storage. The damage amounted to \$2,000,000 but it was not my fault. I cause fires only when used by careless people.

JUDGE: Step down until we hear some of the other defendants.

CLERK: Is Match present? (Match steps forward and takes the witness chair)

MATCH: Somebody threw me on the floor, Your Honor, and a little child found me and used me in play, because she did not know that I was dangerous. First she ignited the curtains at the window and then her own clothing. They took her to the hospital and she may recover but, if she does, she will be disfigured for life. I was not guilty of any wrongdoing and the accident would not have occurred if I had been kept out of the reach of small children.

JUDGE: Take your seat until we hear the rest of the witnesses. Call the next one, Clerk.

CLERK: Electricity, take the witness chair.

JUDGE: Your record is a bad one, Electricity. You started out in life with great opportunities for service, but you seem to have "gone wrong" until you have become the chief cause of fire in the United States. Every year you destroy millions of dollars' worth of property. What is the reason?



ELECTRICITY: Your Honor, I have been basely used. I possess tremendous power, but nevertheless, I am harmless if properly installed and kept within bounds. I should be insulated against chance contacts and my wires should not be given too much to do. I was haled into Court, Your Honor, because I overheated an electric flatiron and set fire to a newly built home. I burn many other homes in the same way every day, but it is not my fault, Your Honor. When I am once put to work I have to continue until I am switched off, but people forget and leave electric irons and other heating devices in contact. Consequently, these devices grow hotter and hotter until they ignite the nearest combustible material and soon there is another fire. Sometimes this occurs at night and causes loss of life, and yet engineers call me the safest known form of power and light, when properly used. If people would only be careful instead of careless in using me, there would be no cause for complaint. (Electricity steps down and takes former chair.)

CLERK: Rubbish is among the defendants, Your Honor.

JUDGE: Very well, call Rubbish. (Clerk beckons and Rubbish advances to the chair)

JUDGE: I find that for a good many years you have been hanging around corners and have become a thoroughly undesirable citizen.

RUBBISH: I was once a man of parts, Your Honor, but now I am only part of a man. I am made up of odds and ends from here and there and have no will of my own. I furnish fuel for the chance spark and ignite spontaneously. If people realized how dangerous I am, they would not have me around; but I find many cellars and attics to sleep in where the careless housekeepers never disturb me and I stay there until I catch fire. I sometimes have to wait years, but the older I am the better I burn. However, I am not at fault, Your Honor, because I cannot remove myself.

JUDGE: You have said a good deal and it is not all rubbish. (To Clerk). Call the next defendant. (Rubbish resumes former chair.)

CLERK: Gas to the bar.

GAS: I would like to tell my story in a few words, Your Honor.

JUDGE: Very well, proceed.

GAS: Before I came into use, Your Honor, people ruined their eyesight with candle-light and often killed themselves with defective oil lamps. Oil was not properly refined in those days, and, therefore, thousands of lamps exploded and caused great damage to life and property. I became and am still a boon to mankind, but I am touchy, I admit, and must be handled with care. People use rubber hose connections on stoves that I am supplying, instead of installing rigid iron pipes; a break develops, I escape into the air, and cause an explosion and fire. Often a leak occurs in the cellar from poor connections or because of defective pipes, and a careless mortal looks for me with a candle or other open flame. He is sure to find me, but in doing so he is apt to kill himself and burn up the property. Carefulness would prevent such occurrences. (Gas steps back to former seat.)

JUDGE: I believe that Defective Chimney is closely involed in fire troubles. Where is he? (Clerk beckons to Defective Chimney.)

JUDGE: I am given to understand that you cause a great many preventable fires.

DEFECTIVE CHIMNEY: Yes, Your Honor, I do. Many contractors do not build me properly. In some places they support me upon brackets instead of building me up from the ground. Sometimes they build me only one brick in thickness and, still worse, construct me with my bricks on edge instead of flat; consequently, I develop cracks through which sparks escape and cause fire. Frequently, the sparks fall upon the roof, and when it is made of wooden shingles there is likely to be another home burned up. Sometimes the cracks are under the roof and the sparks fly into the attic which is a dangerous place for a fire to originate. Careful construction, Your Honor, as set forth in the Standard Building Code, is the only remedy. (Defective Chimney takes former chair)



JUDGE: The name of Gasoline is next.

CLERK: Yes, Your Honor, I will call him. (He beckons and Gasoline takes the witness Chair.)

JUDGE: Gasoline, you have made a place for yourself in good society, and I am shocked to find that you are charged with countless fires.

GASOLINE: Yes, Your Honor, I am forced to admit that this is true, but it is due to the fact that the average citizen does not realize my power. I have killed many people and started thousands of fires because I am volatile and flash up upon slight provocation. Housewives sometimes use me for cleaning purposes in their homes. The moment I am free my vapor starts about the house looking for a flame or a spark. Presently I find it, and, pouf! I cause a terrific explosion. Not long ago I killed a California woman because she used me to clean her silk waist. The rubbing of the silk caused a spark which was all I needed. With automobiles in every highway and byway, nowadays, I have become almost as common as water; yet men will smoke around filling stations and then wonder why there are accidents. I work hard for humanity, and am, Your Honor, reasonably safe when properly handled. I am more dangerous than dynamite, however, when carelessly used, for it takes but a little spark to set me off.

CLERK: Lightning to the bar.

JUDGE (to Lightning who has taken witness chair): We have shocking reports of your work, Lightning; you strike helpless women and children as well as grown men, and destroy their homes. Have you anything to say in defense?

LIGHTNING: Yes, Your Honor; at certain times I am created in the sky by atmospheric conditions, but I am forced by nature to seek the earth. I try to reach the ground by the easiest means. When people equip their buildings with properly installed lightning rods, I use these conductors to travel to the earth and seldom cause any damage in doing so. There are not enough houses properly protected, however, and consequently I have to do the best I can with the means available. I often try flag poles, steeples, and chimneys, because they come nearer to me than other portions of the buildings, but I do not like them as well as rods because they are not such good conductors of electricity. Sometimes I even cause forest fires, but country barns are my specialty. I shall be a force to be reckoned with, Your Honor, as long as the world lasts, and it behooves people to protect themselves against me.

JUDGE: It is evident that in your case, if you spare the rod, you may spoil the property. Clerk, call the next defendant.

CLERK: Bonfire is next. (Bonfire steps forward and takes the witness chair).

JUDGE: The records show, Bonfire, that while you have always been popular with children you have acted toward them treacherously, harming them, and sometimes destroying their homes as well. Is this true?

BONFIRE: Grown people as well as youngsters often start me, Your Honor, and by so doing they frequently cause serious loss of life as well as of property. I am always potentially dangerous and seldom necessary, except to destroy rubbish, but when I am, I should be confined so that I could not scatter sparks. A bucket of water or some other extinguisher should be at hand to keep me within bounds. There was a man in Alabama who forgot my possibilities, and one day, when there was a high wind, lighted me in order to burn up some old chicken coops and trash. There was a wooden fence nearby as well as a frame garage, and before I got thru 191 buildings were destroyed. Nevertheless I plead not guilty, Your Honor, because I do not start fires unless some careless person starts me. (Resumes former seat.)



CLERK: There is one more defendant, Your Honor, Spontaneous Combustion.

(Spontaneous Combustion takes the witness chair.)

CLERK: You were sworn with the others?

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION: Yes, sir.

JUDGE: Proceed.

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION: Many people, Your Honor, think that I am a myth--The Peter Pan of fire causes, but I want you to know that I am a self-starter when conditions are propitious. People allow old rags saturated with linseed oil or some other vegetable fat to accumulate in out-of-the-way corners, and the first thing they know I generate sufficient heat by chemical action to start a fire. I also ignite piles of rubbish where there is oily matter present and all who store large quantities of coal, particularly if it is bituminous, should beware of me. I cost the country each year about \$15,000,000 in property that I destroy, and yet some people doubt my existence.

JUDGE: Do you plead guilty?

SPONTANEOUS COMBUSTION: No, Your Honor, I plead not guilty, for how can I help myself? Chemistry is my master and careless human beings are the chief reasons for my existence.

JUDGE: You may resume your seat (He does so.) (Turns to Clerk) Are there any more defendants?

CLERK: No, Your Honor; none that we have yet been able to locate.

JUDGE: (Turning to District Attorney): The prosecution may sum up.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Gentlemen of the Jury, you have heard these various defendants testify in their own behalf. They have acknowledged their connection with various specific crimes. They also have admitted that they were concerned in thousands of terrible disasters. They have shown no penitence and have expressed no intention of changing their destructive habits. These fire hazards, gentlemen, have convicted themselves by their own testimony. They have shown how dangerous they are, and if they continue at large the very progress of the United States may be jeopardized. We cannot continue to burn up our material resources at the present rate without courting disaster. I believe, gentlemen, that when you consider the evidence you can do no less than convict these defendants as constituting a menace to our country. Their only rightful place is under lock and key. (Resumes seat).

JUDGE: The Counsel for the Defense may now present his rebuttal.

COUNSEL: I move, Your Honor, that this case be thrown out of court on the ground that proof of guilt on the part of the defendants has not been established. These defendants, Your Honor, are for the most part tools--involuntary tools of man. When rightly used they render him great service, for they are mighty, but the power to serve is generally accompanied by the power to harm. I maintain that the testimony of each of these defendants shows complete absence of wrong intentions. They act as they have always acted and always will act under such conditions. Man understands their nature; when he gives them their opportunities he knows, if he will stop to think, what the results must be. Therefore, why blame them for what they cannot help? Why not bring to trial the real culprit, Carelessness, who alone is responsible for most of our fires? Why not bring before the bar of this court the guilty one who causes these defendants to work havoc throughout the land? Without his evil influences they would merely be servants of humanity.

JUDGE: The court is of the opinion that the point is well taken. Carelessness should be the defendant here and not these prisoners. Where is Carelessness, Mr. District Attorney? This court is of the opinion that you have been remiss in your duty.

You have overlooked the arch criminal who causes the majority of all fires.

(Court officer walks over and hands a note to the District Attorney.)



DISTRICT ATTORNEY: Your Honor, I have been looking for Carelessness and I have just received word that he has been brought to court and is now in the anteroom.

JUDGE: Have him brought in. (Carelessness, represented by someone in patched, dilapidated clothing, is hustled in roughly by the court officer who leads him before the Judge.)

JUDGE: The testimony that has been given in this court in the case of The People vs. Fire has indicated that you, Carelessness, are the culprit who should have been brought before the bar of Justice. You are charged with having caused the loss of thousands of lives and the destruction of millions of dollars' worth of property every year. What have you to say in defense?

CARELESSNESS: Nothing, Your Honor, except that I am an ingrained habit of the American people. I begin with the youngest children and stay with them throughout their lives. Other countries do not encourage me to any great extent, but I seem to be welcome in every city, town, and village of the United States, by young and old and rich and poor alike. I recognize danger, but I like to "Take a chance".

JUDGE: That is an explanation, but not an excuse. I charge the Jury, on the evidence of all the other defendants and on his own admission, to find Carelessness guilty in the first degree.

(The Jury consult without leaving their seats; the Foreman rises)

FOREMAN: We find him guilty, Your Honor.

JUDGE: You have heard the verdict. It is now my duty to sentence you in accordance with the dictates of justice. There can be no doubt as to your guilt. You have made it impossible for citizens and municipalities to live safely. You have killed thousands and devastated whole cities by your iniquity. You have filled the land with misery. You have undermined character, lowered efficiency and retarded progress. Incarceration is too good for such as you. Instead you shall be labeled so that all men shall know you and shall shun your presence. You shall be an exile--a man without a country--unless some nation is so shortsighted as to take you in and call you her own. America banishes you forever. Officer, take him away. (Officer exits with prisoner)

JUDGE: The court is adjourned.

(Curtain)