

## Primary Source

**An Interview with Pauline Cuoio Pepe**

On March 25, 1911, a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, which made an article of women's clothing called a shirtwaist. Since the doors were locked to prevent workers from sneaking out or stealing items, leaving the building was difficult. For many workers trapped inside the burning building, the only escape route was to jump out of a window. Before the fire was put out, 146 people had died. The tragedy made many people realize the need for stricter government regulation on business and for stronger unions. A survivor of the fire, Pauline Cuoio Pepe, later recalled the event.

We were just leaving that Saturday. I was fixing my hair at my machine. The cutters were right there. They generally lit a cigarette when they go out. The man was right there. His match lit the scraps under the table. Suddenly, another cutter said, "C'mon, let's run!"

I said, "Ooh, my God, a fire." I ran and I left everything—pocketbook. I was running and the people were all at the door. I saw the people throwing themselves out the window. I wouldn't dare. I didn't have the courage. "I'm not going out, I'd rather die here," that's what I said.

The door was locked. We were about a hundred people. We were hollering and crying. "Open the door!" Banging and banging quite a long time. We saw quite a lot of people throwing themselves out.

We waited a long time. We didn't feel any of the flames, but it was getting warm. The fires went to the windows. I thought about my mother and father. What would they do if I died?

Then all of a sudden we all fell over. Somebody opened the door. "Thank God!" We were all crying and yelling. The noise was terrible. When I got down, the three flights were blazing. The firemen came up and helped us, but we were tumbling down terrible. We were shivering and crying and holding on. It was terrible.

When we got down the stairs the firemen told us to wait because those young people were still jumping down. When we got out, we saw the ladder was pointing up to the sixth floor. It couldn't go up to the eighth. We saw those people jumping down. And the people in the hotel were yelling, "Don't jump down. Get in!" But they wouldn't listen to us. They had made up their mind. They went right through the

glass in the pavement, some of them. There was a big hole there.

They didn't have to throw themselves. Something would have happened. That's too bad all those women died—young girls. . . .

I had a lot of friends who were killed. . . .

We were all torn to pieces. My hair was a mess. My coat was torn. I had no pocketbook or nothing. When my mother saw me, she thought somebody got ahold of me and was killing me. I told them about the fire, and they started hollering terribly. . . .

We were also angry. "What the hell did they close the door for? What did they think we're going out with? What are we gonna do, steal a shirtwaist? Who the heck wanted a shirtwaist?"

from Jeff Kisselhoff, *You Must Remember This*. Reprinted in David Colbert, ed., *Eyewitness to America*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 324–325.

**Main Ideas**

1. How did the fire start, according to Pepe?
2. What two causes of death did Pepe describe?

**Critical Thinking**

3. **Analyzing Points of View** What is the tone of this excerpt?
4. **Evaluating** Do you think the owners of the company should be held responsible for the deaths from the fire. Why?