

The economic conditions immediately following the two world wars differed materially. In 1919 the New Zealand market was flooded with imported goods ordered but not delivered during the war, and the minor depression of the early "20s" followed. If the commonly held theory that bad times are a major contributing factor in fire loss is correct, it would be reasonable to expect an increase in both the number of fires and the amount of loss in the years immediately following the war. This is not shown in either the national or the fire district figures. It was during the comparatively prosperous period 1926 to 1931 that both the number and severity of fires increased, and both figures dropped sharply when the full impact of the world depression was felt in 1931.

On the other hand, the Second World War has been immediately followed by a period of rising prices, full employment, and shortage of goods and accommodation. Replacement of either goods or buildings destroyed by fire is difficult, and there is every financial inducement to the employer, owner, or person in control to take extreme safeguards against fire. In fact, both the number of fires and the average losses have more than doubled. Experience shows that the actual fire-loss figures for any year is determined mainly by the number and severity of large fires. In these reports the dividing-line between the two classes has been taken at £5,000, which represents a fire which has reached a stage difficult to control, and in which the fire is liable to involve the whole or major part of the building and contents. The following table contains an analysis of the losses for three normal low-loss years representative of the period 1931 to 1941, contrasted with the figures for the last three years.

Table II—Comparison of Fire Statistics in Fire Districts, 1938-41 and 1946-49

	1938-39.	1939-40.	1940-41.	1946-47.	1947-48.	1948-49.
Number of large fires (loss £5,000 or more)	13	14	6	19	18	14
Loss in large fires ..	£302,150	£173,882	£103,485	£1,006,630	£748,096	£315,101
Number of small fires (loss less than £5,000)	892	878	843	1,629	1,922	1,959
Loss in small fires ..	£129,339	£106,356	£139,204	£194,878	£244,111	£226,542
Average loss per fire in small fires	£145	£121	£165	£119	£127	£116

The importance of these figures is to show that while the large-fire loss has varied from £100,000 to £1,000,000, the small-fire loss is relatively constant in the two periods. In round figures, the number of small fires and the loss in these fires has doubled in the high-loss period of the last three years. Most fires are due to carelessness of one sort or another. The basis on which the returns have been made in fire districts is not sufficiently accurate and they cover too short a period to warrant a positive deduction being made from them. The figures in these two tables do, however, contain the hint that twice as many fires involve carelessness by twice as many persons. It must also be noted that twice as many fires in trade and industry is likely to result in an increased number of large fires, and an increased national fire wastage which only good fortune will retain within economic limits.

FIRE-PREVENTION

The indications from the world-depression period are that the knowledge that there is not another job around the corner does tend to make people careful to prevent the fire which will throw them out of work. We hope to overcome our post-war economic