

**THE NATIONAL ERECTORS'  
ASSOCIATION AND THE  
INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION  
OF BRIDGE AND STRUCTURAL  
IRONWORKERS**

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The National Erectors' Association and the International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers by Luke Grant

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**LUKE GRANT**

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( United States )  
( Commission on Industrial Relations )

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The National Erectors' Association  
AND  
The International Association of Bridge and  
Structural Ironworkers

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By  
LUKE GRANT  
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WASHINGTON, D. C.  
1915

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## CHAPTER I.

### INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF BRIDGE AND STRUCTURAL IRON- WORKERS.

The International Association of Bridge and Structural Ironworkers was organized at a convention held in Pittsburgh February 4, 1896. Five local unions were represented—New York, Buffalo, Boston, Pittsburgh and Chicago. Each local union had three votes in the convention, which was composed of thirteen delegates.

Formed at a period when the use of structural steel in buildings was being developed, the organization had no fixed precedents to follow. The erection of structural steel was at that time just assuming the position of a distinct trade. In some of the larger cities of the country, a few steel buildings had been erected in the late '80s and the early '90s, but the industry may be said to have been in its infancy at the time the International Association was formed.

Local unions of bridgemen existed in some sections of the country for a number of years previous to the appearance of the first steel skyscraper. The bridgemen were more skilled in the framing of timbers than in the erection of steel, but as the use of steel as a substitute for wood became general, the same workmen readily adapted themselves to the changed character of the work and became "bridgemen" instead of bridge carpenters, as they had once been classed.

From bridge building to construction work, with the appearance of the first steel building, was a natural step for the bridgeman to take, and in Chicago, the birthplace of the modern steel building, the Bridge and Construction Men's Union was formed in 1891. Because of its having been the pioneer, the Chicago union became Local No. 1 when the International Association was formed.

Probably due to the fact that the trade of a structural ironworker does not require as high a degree of skill as some other building trades, the wages paid the ironworkers when they first organized, were much lower than the wages paid to other

mechanics with whom they came in contact on a building. It was some years before the structural ironworker was recognized as a skilled mechanic by the more favored and better organized trades, and it required years of effort for the ironworkers to advance their wages to the level of other trades, or to a point commensurate with the hazardous character of the work they perform.

From the lowest paid trade on a building, the ironworkers through organization have advanced their wages in fifteen years well toward the top of the column of upwards of thirty unions in the building industry. The sharp advance in wages in the structural iron trade has been more marked than in most of the other trades in the building industry, for the reason that the ironworkers started from a lower point.

The following comparison of the wage scale of structural ironworkers for the years 1902 and 1914 in ten of the principal cities, shows an average increase of 21 cents an hour in the period:

City.	Cents per Hour.	
	1902.	1914.
Baltimore .....	43 $\frac{1}{4}$	56 $\frac{1}{4}$
Boston .....	40	56 $\frac{1}{4}$
Buffalo .....	45	62 $\frac{1}{2}$
Chicago .....	50	68
Cleveland .....	47 $\frac{1}{2}$	70
Kansas City .....	37 $\frac{1}{2}$	65
Minneapolis .....	40	62 $\frac{1}{2}$
New York .....	56 $\frac{1}{4}$	62 $\frac{1}{2}$
San Francisco .....	37 $\frac{1}{2}$	75
St. Louis .....	50	75

In a study of the character of the membership of the Bridgemen's Union, there are three factors to be taken into consideration: the comparatively small degree of skill required, the extremely hazardous nature of the employment, and the shifting character of the work, which necessitates being "on the road" much of the time.

That the work requires less skill than most of the other building trades, is shown by the fact that the period of apprenticeship is fixed at six months in some agreements be-



tween the ironworkers and their employers, while the maximum apprenticeship period found in any contracts is eighteen months.<sup>1</sup>

In some agreements the maximum age of an apprentice entering the trade is placed at twenty-five years, in other agreements it is thirty years, and in the Pittsburgh district the maximum age limit is thirty-five years. It will be seen that if the lowest age limit is taken, the structural ironworker apprentice may have reached the age of manhood before taking up the trade.

In most of the skilled trades where an apprenticeship of from three to five years is required, the apprentices are boys of eighteen years of age or under when they enter the trade. Some unions provide that apprentices shall not be over seventeen years of age, while frequently they begin their apprenticeship at sixteen years.<sup>2</sup>

Boys are then in that formative period in their lives when the precept and example of the journeymen with whom they associate, have an influence on their character. In the well organized trades, the apprentices are admitted to the union during their apprenticeship period, and while they are being taught a trade, they also are receiving lessons in self-government and discipline. Attending meetings of their trade union, they hear discussions on trade agreements and relations with employers in their particular craft, so that by the time they become journeymen, they are fairly well versed in matters pertaining to collective bargaining and joint trade agreements.

Owing to the heavy nature of the work of a structural ironworker, which requires strength more than skill, it may be impracticable to employ youths as apprentices, but it is true that the structural ironworker does not get the advantages in

1—In a national agreement between the Erectors' Association and the International Association, effective May 1, 1903, and expiring Jan. 1, 1905, the apprenticeship period is placed at six months. Agreements in New York, Philadelphia and Pittsburgh fix the period at eighteen months. In Chicago the agreements make no specific provisions for apprentices.

2—In agreements between the Carpenters' Union in Chicago and its employers the age limit for apprentices is seventeen years.

training of the average building trades workman, who started to learn his trade as a boy. The men who constitute largely the membership of the bridgemen's organization, are those who have tried other occupations and who have simply "drifted" into the structural iron trade, attracted by the high wages which it offers.

The second factor, the dangerous nature of the employment, is shown in the number of fatal accidents which constantly occur in the trade. For the fiscal year 1911-1912, as shown by the report of the secretary-treasurer of the International Association, 124 death claims were paid out of a total membership of 10,928. Of the 124 deaths occurring in the trade that year, 109 were due to accidents. This is 1 per cent of the total membership.

The figures are more striking if it is considered that out of a total of 124 deaths in the year, only 15 were due to natural causes. In other words, 87.9 per cent died as a result of accidents and 12.1 per cent from natural causes.<sup>1</sup>

The citizen on the street corner, who is fascinated as he watches an ironworker on the end of a narrow beam twenty or thirty stories up in the air, is apt to wonder that the accidents are not more numerous than they are. The trade does not look inviting to the man on the street. For that reason only men endowed with physical strength and daring take up the work. Facing danger daily develops in the ironworker a sort of desperate recklessness, that the workman in a less hazardous occupation does not understand.

In following his occupation as a bridge builder, which constitutes a large part of the ironworker's trade, the workman is compelled to be away from his home much of the time. Railroad bridges have to be built many times miles away from any habitation. The calling is one that hardly attracts the home-loving married man. As a result, the trade develops a class of roving and irresponsible workmen, more noted for strength and physical courage than for trained skill and intelligence.

<sup>1</sup>—Report of Secretary McClory to Indianapolis Convention 1913. The death rate from accidents furnished by Secretary Harry Jones.

When the modern steel building made its appearance, it was followed in the natural course of events by the large construction company, which took contracts for the erection of steel structures in all parts of the country. Workmen were sent by these companies from one city to another, so that the nomadic habits developed in the bridgemen were perpetuated in the structural ironworker. This condition does not exist to the same extent today that it did ten years ago, but it still exists.

The trade which a man follows has a powerful influence on his character. If his work is uncertain and occasional, it has a tendency to make him shiftless and irresponsible. If it is exceptionally dangerous, he is apt to be daring and reckless. If his calling requires him to travel, with only short intervals in any given place, he is not likely to develop in a high degree the social habits that tend to ideal citizenship. A man's mental attitude toward the world is, in no small degree, determined by his trade or calling, which creates his immediate environment.

Because of these things, which are a part of the structural iron industry and inseparable from it, the average ironworker is denied the opportunities for self-development that are enjoyed by the average skilled mechanic in other trades. These factors must be taken into account in seeking to understand and explain certain actions and the forces and motives that lie behind them.

Conditions in the structural iron trade have changed materially for the better in the last fifteen years. Steel construction is common in every large city, which means that efficient workmen can be found in every large center of industry. The necessity for traveling to find employment has been minimized, but not eliminated in the erection of buildings. In the erection of bridges, the conditions have not changed in that respect and crews of workmen must of necessity be sent from one point in the country to another where bridges are being built.

In describing the material from which the Bridgemen's Union had to draw its membership, and the influence which