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Engineer Phelps' Hot Reply to His Critics

***Says the Report of Mayor's Commission Was Partial and Prejudiced—Gay Street Explosion—
Wires to Come Down***

In the reply to the criticisms of the special committee appointed by the mayor to investigate the municipal subways Chief Engineer Charles E. Phelps yesterday made a report to the electrical commission, in which he vigorously "roasted" his critics.

Few more fiery documents have been filed among the city's archives. Besides denying, seriatim, the existence of the defects reported by the committee, Mr. Phelps accuses the members of misrepresenting him and of basing their recommendation upon the statements of parties interested directly in the improvements recommended. With names and figures he backs up his answer, and from the guarded admissions of members of the commission it seems probably that his claims will be approved and that the changes in the subways advocated by the special committee will not be inside.

The committee, which consisted of City Engineer Fendall, Water Engineer Quick and Superintendent of Street Cleaning Iglehart—all experienced engineers—was appointed by the mayor after the subway explosion on Gay Street. Mr. Quick visited New York to make an inspection of the subways of that city, and it was largely upon his observations that the report of the committee was based. This report was to the effect:

First—That the concrete used in local subways was "not first class."

Second—That the drainage provided was inadequate.

Third—That the installation of a ventilating system, at an expense of \$50,000, was absolutely necessary.

To the first of these findings Mr. Phelps makes a stinging reply.

"The statement of the committee that first class concrete was not used," he says, "was based upon a statement which I made personally to the members. The important part of my statement—that in conduit construction it is not necessary to use first class concrete—was not quoted."

Mr. Phelps then sets forth the fact that the concrete used was made of natural cement, "which is accepted, in very large part, throughout the United States as a standard for concrete work."

To the drainage recommendations Mr. Phelps replies by denying that a general system of drains is unnecessary.

"A drain," he says, "would only get the water out of the manhole after it had leaked in. If, by the recommendation of the committee, they mean to adopt a system of drainage which will keep the water out of the ducts and away from the cables, it would be a matter of physical impossibility to do so, because the drainage system itself would not prevent the the water from

coming in, but would only take it out after coming in, and in coming into the manholes it reaches the ducts and cables before it gets to the lower part of the hole to be drained off. There can be no inherent damage to the cables by the presence of water.”

It is in speaking of ventilation that Mr. Phelps’ replies are most caustic.

“The recommendation of the committee,” he said, “by which the commission is advised to expend some \$50,000 to install a system of blowers for ventilation is based upon what is claimed to have been the experience in New York City in systems which have had this method of ventilation in use.

“It does not seem possible that the commission would seriously consider the adoption of such a system, even if it could be installed for the figure named in the report, when the recommendation is founded primarily upon the statements of an interested party, so interested that he is in the business of installing just such equipment, and in the face of the further fact that this method has not prevented explosions and is gradually being abandoned for the more logical method now in use in this city.,

“If the commission desires to further investigate this subject and will permit a suggestion from me, I would say that one or more engineers experienced in conduit construction and operation may readily be retained who could be relied upon to report the matter impartially.”

This portion of the report fell like the proverbial bombshell among the members of the special committee. City Engineer Fendall said that the “interested party” named by Mr. Phelps was William H. Baldwin, of New York, “a friend of Water Engineer Quick.”

“Mr. Quick went to New York and saw Mr. Baldwin,” said Mr. Fendall, “and also inspected the New York subways, and upon his report I based my judgment.”

Mr. Quick, when informed of Mr. Phelps’ criticisms, gave indications of exceeding but smothered rage.

“Mr. Baldwin is an expert,” he said. “He has written a book on ventilation. My report to the committee was based on what he told me and what I saw. I don’t know what effect it had upon the judgment of Messrs. Fendall and Iglehart. In New York they have two subway systems. In the one they had no explosions until the ventilating plant was shut down.”

“Is Mr. Baldwin an ‘interested party’ as claimed by Mr. Phelps?” was asked.

“That’s all right!” explained Mr. Quick, indicating his serious disapproval of the charge. Then his attention was called to a further statement of Mr. Phelps that a blower ventilator would force gas into the cellars of houses and thus cause worse explosions than those on the street.

“Experience doesn’t prove it,” said Mr. Quick.

“Is Mr. Baldwin a friend of yours?” he was asked.

“That’s all right,” replied Mr. Quick. And further than that he would not discuss Mr. Phelps’ report.

That the commission leans toward the side of the latter was shown yesterday by Mayor Hayes and City Register Numsen, two of the members.

“Mr. Phelps’ report is an admirable one,” said the mayor.

“He presents the facts admirably,” said Mr. Numsen.

Meanwhile the members of the special committee, like a lamented statesman, are wondering “where they are at.”

Subway Engineer Phelps yesterday presented to the electrical commission an itemized statement of the damage to the municipal subways and the street pavement caused by the recent explosion on Gay Street. The total is \$14,000, and the commission requested the law department to bring suit for this amount at once against the Consolidated Gas Company. Mr. Phelps

exhibited proofs that the explosion was due to leaking gas pipes. The damage to the buildings along Gay Street was about \$20,000. If the city is successful in its suit the gas company will also have the pleasure of paying this sum to the property owners whose property was injured.

The commission will hold a special meeting next Wednesday to consider the ordering of all electric wires underground. By the terms of the law the electrical companies must be given 150 days' notice to bury their wires. After that they are given two months in which to complete the work.

“If they fail to obey the order of the commission,” said Mayor Hayes yesterday, “I will have their poles chopped down. Overhead wires add thousands of dollars to Baltimore’s fire loss every year. The People’s Bank fire last Sunday exhibited this fact fully.”