



# Worker who survived 1911 Shirtwaist fire dies at 107

**Bessie Cohen became active in the labor movement after the worst factory fire in New York history killed 146 co-workers**

By **MICHAEL T. KAUFMAN**  
New York Times News Service

Bessie Cohen, who as a 19-year-old seamstress escaped the Triangle Shirtwaist fire in which 146 of her co-workers perished in 1911, died Sunday in Los Angeles at age 107.

She was one of the last two known survivors of the Manhattan fire, according to the Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees.

Her son, Jack Kosslyn, an acting teacher and casting director, said she died at the Jewish Home for the Aging in Los Angeles, where she had lived for the past 14 years. Until six weeks ago, he said, she had retained much of her vitality and memory.

Through the years, she had graphically recalled for her family, as well as for historians and documentary filmmakers, what she experienced and witnessed on March 25, 1911, when the worst factory fire in New York history raged through the top three floors of the 10-story Asch Building on the northwest corner of Washington Place and Greene Street.

Inside, about 500 women, mostly

Jewish and Italian immigrants, worked behind locked doors making shirtwaists, blouses of lightweight fabric, depicted as the uniform of modern womanhood in the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson.

### Recollections of a tragic day

It was a Saturday afternoon, and Cohen, then Bessie Gabrilowich, was on the ninth floor. She had emigrated alone from Russia to New York two years earlier and had worked in several shops as a stitcher, saving money to bring her sisters to America. The workers were near the end of their six-day, 52-hour workweek, and because one of the women on the ninth floor had just become engaged, someone had brought a cake, and slices were being passed around.

For the rest of her life, Cohen would remember that earlier in the day, she had urged her friend, Dora Abramowitz, who was 15, to ask the foreman to give her a 50-cent raise to bring her salary up to the \$3 a week that Bessie was earning. At the moment that someone screamed fire, Bessie was teaching a dance step to a fellow worker. The flames were coming up from the cutting room on the floor below.

Within the next 15 minutes, nearly 30 percent of all the Triangle Shirtwaist workers were killed. Cohen would later tell her children that after the warning, she went to look for the cheap straw hat she had

bought the day before, when she heard a foreman shout to her in Yiddish, "Bessie, save yourself." She looked across the room and could see her friend Dora, looking frightened. But when she looked again, Dora was gone. She was one of those who jumped from the windows and died.

The fire trucks' ladders could reach only to the seventh floor. Firefighters held nets below, but so many women were jumping at the same time that the nets tore and did not hold them. Some rushed to the elevator shaft, hoping to escape by sliding down the cables, only to lose their grip. Most of those who lost their lives had worked on the ninth floor.

Later inquiries found that doors leading from the shop areas had been locked, presumably to keep the women at their sewing machines. The owners, who were tried for manslaughter, were acquitted when the jury could not establish whether they had ordered the doors locked or had even known they were locked. But in 1914, civil suits brought by relatives of 23 victims ended with payments of \$75 to each of the families.

On the day of the fire, Cohen would recall, she somehow found her way to a staircase and covered her face with her purse as she ran to the street.

The next day, she returned to the street outside the building, where the bodies were arrayed so that friends and relatives might identify them. A newspaper photographer took a picture of her as she collapsed at the sight; Kosslyn said his mother kept that newspaper picture throughout her life.

Cohen is survived by her son, Jack of Los Angeles; and a daughter, Sylvia Scott of Calistoga, Calif.

# 'Oysterville' author dies in New York at age 88

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Willard Espy, an author known for his rhyming dictionary and love of words, has died in New York City at the age of 88.

Espy, from Oysterville, Wash., on Long Beach Peninsula, died Saturday.

His book "The Game of Words," a collection of word puzzles, grew out of his fascination with anagrams, words made by rearranging the letters of other words.

In 1986 he published "Words to Rhyme With," a 656-page volume

Digest. He later became a book publisher and contributor to such magazines as Harpers, Nation, Atlantic and the New York Times Magazine.

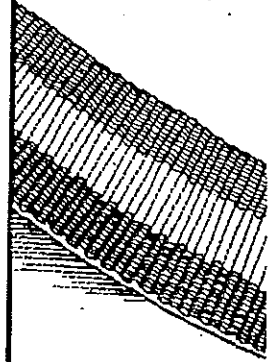
Espy was also known as the father-in-law of author George Plimpton.

For many years Espy lived most of the year in New York and spent summers in his Oysterville cottage, which was built in 1863 in the tiny town founded by his grandfather.

He suffered from a heart ailment for much of the past five years but continued to return in the summers.

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