

Those Fabulous Fire Fighters

by John Major Hurdy



There was a time in the United States when the cry of "Fire!" tugged at men's hearts and made them drop whatever they were doing and plunge into a noisy, pell-mell race that often caused more damage than the fire itself. Those were the days of the volunteer fire company, before today's organized fire departments came into being.

As soon as horn, siren, and bell clamored the alarm, the race was on. Members and friends of the volunteer companies dashed

Adapted by permission from "The Fabulous Freebie Fire Fighters," by John Major Hurdy, in *P.S.*, June 1966. © 1966, Mercury Press, Inc., New York.

© 1976, 1968, Science Research Associates, Inc. All rights reserved.

to their respective engine houses, grabbed the tow lines of their beloved machine, and began hauling her into action. The company's foreman, yelling through his trumpet, urged his men to top speed.

Speed was essential. To a volunteer fire company, "being passed" on the way to a blaze was a social humiliation to be feared more than explosions or toppling walls. Plans to pass a rival engine were carefully laid. On the big day, the enemy company would watch in fury as fresh reserves sprang from nowhere to help the scheming regulars drag their machine to the head of the chase.

Those who made it to the blaze could count on a grand adventure. Nineteenth century buildings generally were timber fire-traps that exploded into an orgy of flames. When the walls fell, spurts of embers sailed up the currents of hot air and showered down on neighboring houses. The men fought back with hook, ladder, and hose until all that was left was smoldering ashes. Then audience and participants streamed toward their favorite tavern to discuss—like theatergoers—this latest performance.

Many a well-known citizen was on the roster of an engine company. Senators and millionaires vied with each other for the privilege of running the machines. To be a volunteer required a fat wallet or a husky set of shoulders—preferably both—for the old engines were purchased, dragged, and pumped by the volunteers themselves.

Heavy, massive machines called "bull engines" were most favored. San Francisco's Monumental No. 6 required forty men to pump and drag her. New York's pride was

the Man Killer, which had gone out of control on more than one occasion, crushing its own runners.

One of the major sources of rivalry between volunteer companies was the engine's appearance. Funds were lavished to make the old gal a rolling art gallery. In addition to their paint, many of the old gals were gold-leafed, silver-embossed, waxed, and polished. The boys of Pennsylvania Engine Company No. 12 sent a draft of \$5000 for the construction of a machine worthy of their dignity, and then, fearing their dignity required more, sent an additional sum. The second draft exhausted the maker's ingenuity and he had to inquire how he was expected to spend it. "Convert it into silver or gold and stick it on anywhere," came the reply.

The men felt it necessary to live up to their machines in splendor of dress. Consequently, the volunteers had two sets of uniforms—their fire-fighting clothes and their marching outfits.

The fireman's hat, probably the most essential piece of clothing, protected the men's necks from flying cinders and shielded their eyes from the glare of flames. Just as important, perhaps, it distinguished the volunteers from the ever present looters.

An ordinary hat, whose basic material was leather, could cost as little as three or four dollars, but most of the men managed to spend hundreds. Boots also were a must and quickly became standard equipment. An official badge (often the sole contribution of a grateful but thrifty city government) completed the working uniform.

The dress uniform was an entirely dif-

ferent matter. It consisted of a scarlet or yellow shirt, a broad black leather belt with a huge brass buckle, a handsome pair of suspenders, and the latest in black leather boots. For the final touch, a bright bit of silk was tied carelessly around the neck. Also standard were marching hats, fully eight inches high and decorated with hand-painted pictures of the old gal. Embroidered satin banners and silver speaking trumpets completed the company's marching equipment.

Most of the volunteers were young men, mainly because of the necessity for pumping. In reality the "engine" was nothing more than a king-size pump on wheels. On either side of her were long wooden rails—the pump handles—each requiring a team of six to twenty husky men. Pumping water from its source (usually a nearby well) meant pushing the rails in an arc from shoulder height to knee level. While the men were pumping, the foreman established the beat and kept their efforts coordinated. He stood on the engine box, trumpet to his lips, shouting with every ounce of lung power, "Up and down, up and down..."

Efficient pumping required not only teamwork but replacements for the pumpers. Beats of more than a hundred strokes a minute weren't uncommon, and the ground around the machine would be littered with fallen firemen, gasping for breath like fish out of water.

Pumping drill was a weekly necessity and the occasion for a good bit of practical joking. Dogs, cats, children, and local cranks found themselves being used for target prac-

tice. If the town boasted two or more companies, Sunday afternoon drills sometimes broke out in a full scale water fight.

The initial hint of modern times came with the development of the first rubber hose. They had been made of riveted leather, and a more miserable method of conveying water from here to there can scarcely be imagined. A leather hose, even though oiled and rubbed constantly, still oozed water, and if neglected leaked like a sieve. The new rubber hoses permitted the men to throw a hundred-foot stream without half killing the men pumping.

Unfortunately for the volunteers, however, the next invention that came their way was the steam engine. As long as big shoulders and bulging leg muscles were essential, the volunteers were undisputed kings. But steam power made muscles unnecessary.

The volunteers fought steam power with everything they had. It was a glorious struggle but a hopeless one. By 1865 the manufacturing of steam engine fire trucks was a mushrooming business. In one skirmish after another, steam pushed the volunteers off the fire-fighting lines.

In San Francisco the paid fire department took over at midnight, December 2, 1866. One company sounded a false alarm to give the boys a goodbye run with their engines. Afterward a proper funeral was held, with lighted candles and dirges and a reading of the fireman's burial service. Then the men marched the company carriage into the yard for the last time.

A way of life was gone forever.

CHECK YOUR READING

1. Apparently the most humiliating experience for a volunteer fire company was
 - A failing to put out a fire
 - B being passed by another company
 - C having to pull their machine
2. The fire fighters and their audience seem to have looked upon a fire as a great
 - A adventure
 - B tragedy
 - C nuisance
3. The most welcome addition to a fire company was a man who was
 - A wealthy
 - B husky
 - C Both A and B
4. The "bull engine" called the Man Killer probably acquired that nickname because of its great
 - A weight
 - B beauty
 - C cost
5. The appearance of the "old gals" can best be described as
 - A streamlined
 - B somber
 - C ornate
6. The most important part of the fire-fighting uniform was the
 - A boots
 - B hat
 - C badge
7. The marching uniform seems to have been designed primarily to
 - A provide protection
 - B ensure comfort
 - C draw admiration
8. The main job of the foreman at a fire was to
 - A keep the men from fighting
 - B arrest people for looting
 - C coordinate the pumping
9. The main disadvantage of the leather hose was that it
 - A leaked
 - B twisted
 - C buckled
10. The invention that proved fatal to the volunteer fire departments described in the story was the
 - A rubber hose
 - B steam engine
 - C electric pump