

What Is A Fire Fan?

By ROBERT GREENOCK



Robert Greenock

WHAT is a fire-fan?

Some people collect stamps or coins, some build model airplanes or trains, some snap everything in sight with candid cameras and others are fire-fans. Why? I don't know and I guess they don't either.

I'm a fire-fan.

I started at the very tender age of four when I ran to the scene of a burning bungalow three blocks from home in San Francisco, thereby causing my mother's hair to turn grey, to say nothing about the way the seat of my trousers sizzled when she caught up with me.

The tanning I got didn't discourage me. At the age of ten I was the pest of the engine-house nearby, asking questions until my firemen friends, I fear, were tempted to chase me home. Even at that age, though, I wasn't a bad sort of fire-fan. I knew better than to touch the shiny brass poles or the apparatus. I knew enough to keep out of the way. But I asked so many questions about the bells and telegraph key, the location of companies and a million other things that interested me that the firemen probably considered me the scourge of the district.

The men on a certain truck (hook-and-ladder) company were great humorists. It took me two weeks of the hardest kind of work to win the privilege of riding the running board. I did everything from asking

the firemen in the basement for a bucket of steam for the captain to running from the joker-stand down through the basement and up the back stairs in full equipment including bunkers, St. Joe coat, helmet, belt axe and pikepole. I was timed and after each dash a consultation of the men lounging in the front of the house always resulted in the unanimous decision that I was too slow. Finally, I passed the "test" and from that day on, I was a "member."

But what is a fire-fan?

A fire-fan is any red-blooded individual with a mania for being on the scene of every first-class fire. Something inside him flares up at the sound of a siren. He has an overwhelming impulse to run in the direction the engines are racing. He is possessed of a peculiar sixth sense, which enables him to reach the scene

ing but offer advice. Real fire-fans are not kibitzers or second-guessers. They have nothing but respect for the departmental Chief and his men. They know how and when to help and when to keep out of the way. The real fire-fan is heartily liked by the firemen. He is their best friend.

Who are fire-fans?

Fire-fans are a band of romantic adventurers who steal away from prosaic jobs to revel for a few hours in the glamorous uncertainty of battle with man's oldest enemy. Architects, manufacturers, brokers, bankers, doctors, lawyers, salesmen, teachers and even priests—all crafts and creeds are numbered in the ranks of the fire-fans.

Where are fire-fans?

They live next door to you, above you, all around you. It makes no difference whether you live in San



of the blaze by the time the first lengths of hose are taken off the pumpers.

The fire-fan is not to be confused with the "curbstone chiefs" who turn out en masse for each fire to do noth-

Francisco, New York, Squeedunk or South Bend. Fire-fans are there. There is something of the same thrill in pulling the hose reel up Main Street in Podunk that there is in dragging a high-pressure line in De-

troit. Eating smoke in Oskaloosa brings the same kick as heeling a ladder in Chicago. Set a fire-fan down in Greenland and let an Eskimo in his igloo overturn a whale oil lamp and then watch your fire-fan come charging across the ice with a hatfull of snow.

When are fire-fans?

Whenever sirens howl and bells clang, whenever flames crackle and smoke rolls, then fire-fans come out of hiding. They appear as though by magic. There is something primitive about the fire-fan. He thrives on the roar of flames, the smell of smoke. He thrills at the robust heroism of the firemen. He marvels at the shrewd tactics of the company commanders, the generalship of the Chief. He loves to be an actor in a mighty fight, to stand shoulder to rubber-coated shoulder with the pipemen and truckmen.

Next day, he may drudge at a humdrum job, but his first spare moment will find him down at the fire house where he fans, hashing and rehashing the latest fire with all the zest of the old war vets in the Soldiers Home reliving Gettysburg or the Argonne.

Lone Wolf or Gregarious

A fire-fan may be a lone wolf or he may run with a pack. In the last few years the packs, known as "box clubs," have become increasingly popular. These box clubs add an air of respectability (in the eyes of the wives, mothers and sisters of the fans) which assists the fire-fan in preserving a perfect record in matter of attendance at "good" fires.

While a man may find it a bit difficult to enumerate his reasons for being a fire-fan to his skeptical, sober-minded friends, he finds it increasingly difficult to explain to his practical-minded wife just why it is necessary to frost his fingers and return home several hours late with the smell of a smokehouse and several inches of ice on his overcoat. His friends may regard him as slightly demented and a poor insurance risk, but how can he argue with his wife?

She tells him it wasn't his fire. The building belonged to Smith. Smith has plenty of money. He probably owns two overcoats and doesn't even go to fires. Then, there were men who get paid for putting out fires. Besides, it was a waste of time. The furnace needs cleaning and the kitchen could stand some paint. And why a man will suddenly leave a housefull of guests to race away into the sleety night just to see a fire is beyond her comprehension.

Sure it's hard to explain. And it's hard to get the overcoat to look (or smell) the same after dirty water, washing down the dust of ages from between the rafters together with bits of plaster and hot embers have made repairs next to impossible.

Ignorant scoffers contend that a fan is a pyromaniac. Firemen know better. As the fire-bug is their worst enemy, so the fire-fan is their best friend. A fire-fan is primarily interested in seeing blazes stopped.

Speaking of Sportsmanship

When 90,000 supposedly sane and normal humans sit in the rain or snow cheering the muddled efforts of twenty-two men with an inflated pigskin, when 100,000 others crowd into an arena to watch two leather-fisted financiers exchange punches and when another 85,000 incoherents beg a spindly-legged but fat athlete to "kiss the old apple—give it a ride"—that's sport!

But when another group of citizens go in for a game that makes football look like kiss-the-pillow, a game that takes every fiber of nerve, every ounce of strength, a game that requires strategy and the staunchest heart, a game in which the stakes are millions of dollars and thousands of lives annually—that's eccentricity! Well, the fire-fan is willing to be listed among the "nuts" just so long as he can sit around the engine house awaiting the call to duty, just so long as he can have an old coat and a pair of bunkers nearby.

A Fire Fan Talks

Listen to Robert C. Anderson, Vice-President of the Buckeye Iron and Brass Works in Dayton, Ohio, and Chief of the Box Seven Association of that city which is one of the "box clubs" previously mentioned:

"The critical public forgets that there were fans before there were Fire Departments. No doubt, while Nero fiddled, there was a stout company of Roman volunteers in dripping togas, standing up to their waists in the Tiber, filling buckets for the Imperial fire brigade. Pliny mentions the fire-fans of Ancient Rome. Apollodorus, architect to the Emperor Trojan, describes the fire-fans of ancient times running with bagpipe-like instruments full of water.

"Hero of Alexandria refers to the siphons used in conflagrations and the hearty volunteers who manned them. It was a body of fire-fans under General Phil Sheridan who finally conquered the Chicago fire more than a half century ago. New York's 'buffs' are the lineal descendants of those hardy burghers who rolled themselves in buffalo robes and slept over the engine house on winter nights in order to be on hand for emergencies. These elder volunteers were facetiously called 'buffaloes' by

other burghers, who considered ninepins better sport and the contraction of the name clings to this day."

Few persons realize that some of our large cities in the eastern part of the United States receive all their fire protection through fire-fans in the guise of volunteers. Harrisburg, Pa., with a population of 85,000 is protected by 3,000 fire-fans. The only paid members of the department are the Chief, the Assistant Chief and the drivers of the apparatus. The Mayor is a lowly hoseman when the firebells sound. Bank presidents climb ladders and swing axes with salesmen and janitors. Not only are they volunteers, but these fire-fans actually pay for the privilege of fighting fires. It costs a dollar a year to belong and fines are heavy if one should not report for duty at a fire in his district. The odd part of it all is that there are several thousand more on the waiting list, begging for a chance to become a glorified fire-fan, a volunteer!

In many cities, fans have been appointed as Fire Commissioners. Some years ago, when the Mayor of Detroit was looking for a Fire Commissioner he chose a fire-fan, a man of such integrity that even the opposition newspapers hadn't the heart to criticize the appointment. That man was C. Hayward Murphy, a businessman. For many years Murphy has been a fan, simple, hearty and a hose-lugging one, at that.

One of the organizers of the "Box 12 Associates" in Detroit, Murphy not only gave freely of his own money for departmental activities, but he put on a helmet and boots and went on the job with the rest of the boys whenever there was a tough fire to fight.

When "Big Bill" Thompson, the king-baiting Mayor of Chicago, wanted a first-class Fire Commissioner a few years back, whom did he choose? Albert W. Goodrich was his name, and they say he started his fire-fan activities at the tender age of nine months, when he began creeping to fires. As the years progressed, so did Mr. Goodrich, and he was getting to fires in short order when "Big Bill" appointed him.

With all his fire-fan experience behind him, Goodrich knew what he wanted to do and did it. Consequently, he accomplished much during his tenure. He modernized stations and equipment. When he took office there were only thirty-seven truck companies covering Chicago. Now there are fifty-two. It wasn't that the companies hadn't been needed for many years. It was just the fact that a fire-fan stepped in and did the things where other Commissioners had

contented themselves with playing politics.

Speaking about doing something, they tell a story about Goodrich visiting the downtown fire alarm office late one night, which was nothing unusual, for the Commissioner was always popping in at unexpected times. He was conversing with one of the operators when a still alarm was received by 'phone from the far northwest side of the city. Without hesitation, the operator stepped to the bank of telegraph keys on the dispatcher's table, called the company nearest the fire and had them on their way in a matter of seconds. It was a sparsely settled section of the city that the call came from, and the engine sent, No. 125, was about two miles away.

Nine minutes later a box struck. After it had been relayed through the alarm office, Goodrich, proudly displaying his fire-fan knowledge, said: "That's 125's box!"

"Naw," came the retort from the operator, "that *would* be their box if they were in there to pull it, but they ain't there yet!"

Goodrich was nearly overcome. He sputtered, stuttered, grew red. Nine minutes and a company less than two miles away wasn't in yet? Impossible! But two minutes later the captain of No. 125 called the alarm office to ask for help, not knowing that some citizen had run two or three blocks to pull the box and that help already was on the way. That clinched the argument. But why did it take so long for that company to get in there?

The operator explained that No. 125 was equipped with a Smith pumper which was very fine as far as pumping ability went, but as far as speed was concerned, a ten-ton gravel truck could probably waltz rings around it. The Commissioner stomped out of the office.

Check on Commissioner

Next morning before the operator went off duty at nine o'clock, he was summoned to the 'phone.

"This is Commissioner Goodrich. You told me last night that No. 125 has a Smith pumper. You're a liar. They've got a Jones." And he hung up. A check-up revealed that the Commissioner had called the Fire Department shops at eight o'clock that morning and ordered the much speedier Jones pumper sent to No. 125's quarters.

Needless to say, firemen appreciate such a Commissioner rather than one of the all too prevalent type that would rather attend teas in full dress than a 4-11 in a rubber coat and helmet.

Fire-fans have organized into associations in various cities. In Boston they call themselves the "Box 52 Associates." The fifty-two members meet formally once a month.

Fire-Fan Passengers

Informally, they hop the tailboard of whatever rig rolls out of the quarters they frequent. They have been organized for more than twenty years. They carry department badges, always refraining from abusing any privileges they receive through them. Several of the members have private alarms in their homes and by a system of relay calls all are notified of all multiple alarm fires.

One member recently stated that he had responded to an average of 190 alarms a year and that he has foregone the pleasure of a residence in the more exclusive suburbs because it would not only deprive him of his alarm bell, but that it would take him too long to "get in" on fires in the high value districts.

In many cities the fire-fans have contributed coffee wagons, which turn out for the large fires. Sometimes a fireman is detailed to operate the wagon; more often the fans themselves operate it.

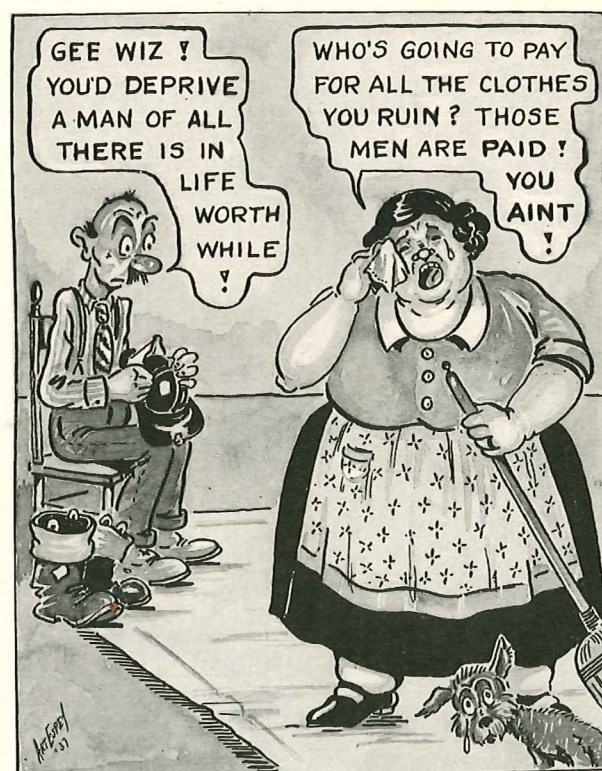
Paxton Mendelssohn, one of Detroit's leading business men and a charter member of the Box 12 Associates in Detroit, presented the local department with a combination ambulance and coffee wagon. The combination responds to all multiple alarm fires and is so completely equipped that a surgeon could, if necessary, perform operations of an emergency nature at the scene of the fire. The rig cost Paxton in the neighborhood of \$15,000, but what does that mean to a fire-fan of twenty-five years' service?

Ambulances are often given by public-spirited citizens and the white-jacketed doctors aboard them are, more often than not, donating their services as members of the local fire-fans' club. In New York there are honorary department surgeons who keep their siren-and-bell equipped cars ready for instant service. When the gongs in their homes strike, they're really "gone with the wind,"

for they turn out with the alacrity of ambitious recruits.

Addiction to fire-fanning is difficult to break. Smoke, like hard liquor, gets into a man's system. How many times has the habitual fire-fan sworn he's through, usually after an engine cracks up or a wall falls on some of his pals? For a week he stays away determinedly from engine houses. In a spirit of martyrdom he throws out the alarm bell that has kept his family awake for years, the bell that has awakened him to joyous battle many a zero night. He mournfully puts aside his helmet and boots. Say what you will, he's through. He must think of his family, and suppose that wall hadn't missed him? And at his age, there's his heart to consider.

Then when temptation is strongest,



he hears his home company push out. Something in the tone of the siren stirs his blood mightily. Bells in the distance jangle his nerves. Must be a box alarm, at least. He opens that window, sniffs. He imagines a red glare in the sky. He'll just walk down to the engine house to see if there really is something doing; he was going out for cigars anyway.

You know what happens. Hours later, he sneaks up the stairs to his bedroom, smelling of smoke, clothes soaked, eyebrows singed, knuckles barked, but with a song in his heart.

"Well," he whispers, "we beat it. The first companies in couldn't hold it and had to call for help. They finally pulled a fourth on it and you



should have seen the gang knock it when they once got set. Guess I'll go down to the engine house tonight."

The fire-fan is not geographically-minded. Away from home, the first place he heads for after he arrives in town is the fire house. He examines the apparatus, visits fire alarm headquarters, inquires about the platoon system, the pay, and discusses the merits of various types of engines. He argues the advisability of three-inch hose on the first lead-out and the trend to siamese connections. Do they have a water tower, are heavy streams necessary and do they fight their fires from the street?

The skipper may take charge of him, or the Chief may show him around. Maybe he's asked to have supper. He might even bunk in the house or perhaps he stands the watches with the men. Firemen are the same hard-fisted, fine knights of the helmet and axe the country over and they greet the fan with open arms knowing that he loves the game even as they do.

One of the finest fire-fan organizations in the country is the Box 12 Associates in Detroit, of which Paxton Mendelssohn is Chief and C. Hayward Murphy, First Deputy Chief. They were elected to office back in 1926, when Box 12 was first organized and have tried many times to resign in favor of someone else. However, the other members have refused to hold an election and so Mendelssohn and Murphy go on, year after year, heading a real fire-fan's organization.

The workings of Box 12 are interesting. Let Paxton himself explain a few of the rules and regulations:

"No one can apply for membership. One does not come in to Box 12 either through financial or social position. One's clubs and home life do not enter into the qualifications. As long as a man is a gentleman and a sincere fire-fan, the size of his bank account or the home he lives in matters little. Therefore, while we have several millionaires in our club, we have men of all types and professions and we have some very humble souls, who work on salaries for a living, but when once accepted as a member of Box 12, they are all on equal footing. Only first name salutations are allowed.

"The only way one can attain membership in our organization is as follows: An active or resident honorary member is permitted to invite a guest for the purpose of inspection without the guest's knowledge of that purpose. At a subsequent meeting, he is possibly proposed for membership and if there are no more than two negative votes, he may and can be elected at the following meeting.

"The new member is then called on the 'phone and informed his presence is desired at the meeting. It makes no difference what time of the night it is. When he arrives, unaware of the purpose of the call, he is subjected to an initiation which is humorous, but not damaging.

"One feature of Box 12 is that each member is presented with a regular leather fire helmet as his badge of membership. This is never used in public or at fires. The meetings are devoted to sociability, where good fellows with the same inclinations are given a chance to get together.

"It is part of our code of ethics that we must always boost and never unfairly criticize our Fire and Police Departments. We take no position whatsoever in politics or promotions, merely attempting to be good fellows on friendly terms with the officers of these two departments. No paid member either in or out of uniform in the Police or Fire Departments can be an active member for obvious reasons, but some are taken in as honorary members."

Box 12 has neither charter, by-laws or any regulations other than those written in the minute book, which contains a complete record of the organization even if written in facetious manner. When first founded, Box 12 members met monthly at one another's homes, with the host defraying the expenses.

"But that idea soon proved impracticable," says Mr. Mendelssohn, "because, as I stated before, we have humble as well as wealthy souls. It got to the point where only the wealthier members could afford entertainment and it became embarrassing to the members with lesser means,

whose homes and pocketbooks were not equal to the occasion. Therefore, we soon started holding our meetings in private dining rooms in a local hotel whose manager is a charter member of our organization and a former Fire Commissioner, and we continued meeting in that manner until about two years ago."

At that time, Paxton and his wife, after talking it over, decided to dispense with having their chauffeur live on the premises and completely refurnished the five-room apartment over their garage as a club for the use of Box 12. Since that time the quarters have become known as the home of "Rescue Company 12." Paxton's household staff does the catering and each member pays \$1.50 to defray expenses at each of the meetings. That sum is assessed only when the member actually attends and is used to pay for the food and beverages. There is no initiation or other charge excepting the \$5 annual dues.

Other Box Associations

Of course, there are many other box associations, run on less pretentious scales. All have been founded on the same principles. Other fans, belonging to no formal organization, meet informally in groups by design or chance in their "home" firehouse. While there may be no formal unit, there is always an air of understanding, a feeling of fellowship among true fire-fans that excludes the "curbstone chiefs" and the curiosity seekers. A would-be fan, seeking to fraternize with the already accepted fans in a particular engine house, must prove himself before he is generally accepted as one of the "gang."

Acceptance may be signified in one of several ways. The firemen may invite him to supper or to bunk all night, one of the fans may offer a lift to the 4-11 or he may be called at home by a fan or member of the company when something—a 4-11 maybe—happens. On the other hand, let the prospect get too gabby or nosey and he's soon cold-shouldered out.

Fans have peculiarities. One fan in Chicago wouldn't walk across the street to see a five-alarm fire. He liked to sit listening to the joker and watching the ticker tape, meanwhile figuring out what companies should be moved by the alarm office to fill in here and there. When the office moved a company he hadn't counted on, out would come maps, locations of companies, index cards, etc., to show that he was right and they were wrong. On rare occasions he would admit that their moves were better than his.

He was a smart fan, too. A doctor, he knew the approximate location of every fire box in Chicago, the Fire Department code, and many details that only an observant fan can pick up. Some of the firemen on Truck 16 (his home company) used to run off fake 5-11's on the ticker tape while "Doc" was out on a call. Then they'd give him a big "build-up" about the raging fire when he did show his face in quarters. But invariably he smelled the rat. Jumping into his car, he would drive over to the quarters of Engine 63, less than a mile away, to check their ticker tape. They soon gave up trying to fool "Doc."

Other fans, who wouldn't miss a big fire under ordinary circumstances, will gladly remain in their "home" quarters when they know that a strange company from another part of town is going to fill in while the home company responds to the fire. They remain for the explicit purpose of showing the fill-in company the district and aiding in any other way possible.

How Fans Aid the Firemen

During the great stockyards conflagration of May, 1934, fire-fans proved their mettle in Chicago. With more than a hundred of the 118 pumpers in service at the fire, many fans forsook the fiery spectacle to "go in service" in their home district. It naturally took the already overburdened fire alarm office some time to organize skeleton companies comprised of off-shift firemen and pumpers from the shops. Most of the apparatus was in the shops for repairs or painting and had to be loaded with hose and other equipment.

In the meantime, a number of fire-fans got small delivery trucks, backed them into engine houses and loaded them with all the spare hose and equipment available. They then reported to the fire alarm office what they had done and informed the operators that they would make every attempt to hold any fire in check, until the nearest engine company, perhaps five miles away, could get there.

Fans "Move In" to Vacated Houses

Other fans, backed up by the thirty-odd pumpers that small towns and villages near Chicago supplied, filled in the all too-vacant quarters. They not only backed them up by directing them to the many small fires these volunteers (they really were volunteers in many cases) battled, but they actually dragged hose, lugged hand-pumps and pike poles and swung

axes. And they were glad to do it. Those fans stuck on the job until there were regular firemen to take care of any emergency. Maybe they missed the big blaze in the "yards," but they had the satisfaction of knowing they had done their duties as citizens and real fire-fans.

Other Ways in Which They Help

Every day, fire-fans all over the country aid the Fire Departments. Many times the extra help of the fan in heeling a ladder on icy pavement or dragging hose for long stretches has meant the saving of human lives, to say nothing about the saving in dollars and cents. A fan or two may mean the difference between a still alarm and a box or multiple alarm. By doing helpful little things at a fire, firemen are freed for other duties which may save calls for more men and apparatus.

Help Called by Fan

For example, a certain truck company moved into another's quarters during a 5-11 in a large city. One of the regular fans rode along. They had no sooner reported for duty to the alarm office when they were given a "still" to a location a few blocks away. The fire was in an office-apartment building and was going good when the truck and engine got there. In fact, it was going so good that the windows blew out with a "whoosh" as they pulled up. People on upper floors were hanging out windows, screaming for help and threatening to jump. It was obvious that lifesaving had to be done and in a hurry. It was also evident that one truck and one engine company would never extinguish that fire.

With only five men and an officer on each of the two companies, it was hardly the thing to do to send a man to the nearest box or 'phone to get additional companies when people were crying for help and with lines needed on the fire. Hastily looking around, the captain of the truck yelled to the fan to get help.

Knowing the nearest box to be several blocks distant, the fan ran to the drugstore at the corner, called the fire alarm office on the 'phone and explained the situation. Then he ran back and heeled ladders while firemen carried women and children to safety. No one lost his life and with the additional help summoned by the fan, the fire was soon out.

Insurance Patrol Assisted

Another fan once helped an insurance patrol company protect fur-

nishings in a large apartment building by lugging covers to the patrolmen, who were at a disadvantage because of their six mile run on the box alarm following a "still." Due to his efforts, a greater amount of valuables were saved from water damage than would have been ordinarily possible. The captain of that patrol never forgot that fan and always has time for a friendly word whenever they meet.

And so, while you've been reading this, fire-fans all over the country have been chasing the big red wagons or are waiting for the chase to begin. Why? I don't know, except that some people collect stamps, or coins, some build model airplanes or trains, some snap everything in sight with candid cameras and others are fire-fans.

And I'd rather be a fire-fan.

Ladies' Entertainment at I.A.F.C. Convention

An extensive program for the entertainment of the ladies attending the convention of the International Association of Fire Chiefs, at Oklahoma City on October 19-22, has been arranged by the local committee. The program follows:

Tuesday, October 19

2:00 p.m.—Bridge party and tea, Biltmore Hotel.
6:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m.—Dutch lunch at Main Auditorium.
8:00 p.m. to 11 p.m.—Entertainment: Stage drill by Kiltie Girls; stage performance by Boy Scout Whip Team; stage performance and dance by Native Oklahoma Indians.

Wednesday, October 20

10:30 a.m.—Shopping tour for ladies.
3:00 p.m.—Educational tour of the oil field by motor transportation.
5:30 p.m.—Barbecue at State Fair Grounds.
6:30 p.m.—Wild gas well on fire in front of the Grandstand. Oil fire in front of the Grandstand.
7:00 p.m.—Return to Convention Headquarters.
8:00 p.m.—Theater Party.

Thursday, October 21

12:30 p.m.—Luncheon and style show, modeled by O C F D Ladies at Ormands Cafe.
6:30 p.m.—Civic banquet and Ball, Biltmore Hotel.

The Ladies Entertainment Committee includes the following: Mrs. Geo. B. Goff, Chairman; Mrs. Geo. R. McAlpine, Mrs. Geo. G. Leech; Mrs. Geo. F. Ross, Mrs. J. P. Carter, Mrs. L. Chenoweth, Mrs. Elmer Davis and Mrs. A. H. Paine.

West Virginia Firemen Meet

Chief G. E. Mosser of Thomas, W. Va., was elected President of the West Virginia Firemen's Association at the annual convention held at Thomas, September 10 to 11. The other officers are W. G. McCauley, attorney of Moorefield, First Vice-President; John D. Brehaney, Ridgeley, Second Vice-President; H. G. Fridinger, Martinsburg, Secretary and W. W. Long, Keyser, Treasurer. Martinsburg won the prize for parade appearance.